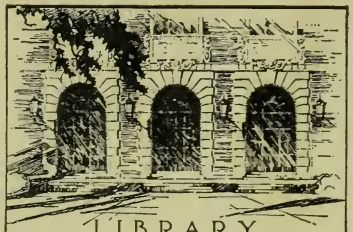

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CARITÀ

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CARITÀ

BY

MRS OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF

'THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD'

ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

SECOND EDITION

LONDON

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CARITÀ.

CHAPTER XVII.

EDWARD.

Cara had a visitor quite early next day, when she had just retired upstairs to the drawing-room after breakfast. It was Edward Meredith, who came with some message from his mother. He had been Cara's friend when they were both children, though Oswald was the one who had claimed her intimacy since she grew up; and he had come now on a sort of investigation to see for himself whether his brother had taken his place. I think Cara, too, had a consciousness of Edward's meaning, though neither of them could have put it into words; and no idea of love, properly so called, was in the minds of the boy and girl. To be sure, he was twenty

one, no longer legally a boy, and thought himself very much a man in many ways. He was aware that the little serious maiden, who had been the friend of his childhood, appeared very sweet and attractive to him now, and that he did not like Oswald to assume the privileged place by her, to be the one who talked with her and walked with her, and offered her those small services which it is often more pleasant to render than to receive. Edward was not jealous of his brother, but he had the suppressed consciousness of being placed at a disadvantage by Oswald, which is not very unusual in the mind of the younger of such a pair. Oswald had been, not above him, but a step in front of him all his life; he had what those who did not like him called more showy qualities, what those who did like him described as greater talents than Edward's. He talked better, he was more ready in demonstration of his sentiments, and could always express himself—whether on paper or in speech—more fluently. These were real advantages; and to these, as was natural, the young man who felt himself to be second added others which were not so real. He thought Oswald's verses, and literary pretensions, and

gracefulness, and good looks were all infinitely superior to his own, and was apt to be depressed, and not to do himself justice in Oswald's presence. It was a relief to find how late Oswald was, and that he could come in, early in the morning, to test Cara, and find out if all her friendliness had been transferred to his brother. If so, Edward would not grumble, but he would know what he had to expect, and would not look for anything more. When he had delivered his mother's message, there was a little pause. They had both a little ingenuous awe of each other, and did not know how to begin.

'How long it is since I have been here!' Edward said at last; 'not since the days when I used to be afraid to move for fear of breaking some of the beautiful things. My mother wisely refrained from china in those days; but we were always told that Mrs. Beresford was "very particular." You do not mind my speaking of her? I remember her so well lying on the sofa, like a picture. You are like her, Cara, but not very like her——'

'No; for she was beautiful,' said Cara, simply; and Edward took her words as she said them, without interposing a laughing com-

pliment, as Oswald would have done. 'I do not mind; though sometimes I wonder, when I am sitting alone here——'

'You wonder? what?'

'All about her,' said Cara, her voice dropping lower; 'about her dying. Don't you think it must be hard to die like that when everybody wishes you to live? And then—about—whether she ever comes here? the drawing-room is just as she left it——'

Edward looked round it, following her glance. He did not smile; his countenance had an air of sympathy and interest, almost awe.

'It is so strange, sitting here when all the house is still. One seems to see a chair placed differently to what it was before. I did not do it; and then everything is so still. One feels as if someone was looking, gazing at one. Sometimes I am sure that the eyes are there—not unkind, to frighten me, but solemn and steady, not changing from one thing to another, as we do. Did you ever think what happens when we die?'

'Not much, I am afraid,' said the young man, himself feeling the spell of the stillness,

and as if those eyes might be upon him of which she spoke. 'But, Cara, you ought not to be here by yourself, for it cannot be good for you to feel like this, or to be thinking such things. *I* like you to be here; but it would be better, more natural, for you in the country. You ought not to stay——'

'This is home,' said Cara, with a little sigh; and then she brightened up. 'I think I am making believe for the pleasure of being sympathised with,' she said. 'I am not dull. It is only sometimes, only now and then, in the morning. Somehow one feels more lonely in the morning, when everybody is busy. To have nothing to do, and to see no one all the long, active forenoon! At the Hill one could run out in the garden; there was always something to do; or if it rained, there was work; but no one asks what I do with myself here.'

'My poor little Cara! forgive me. I thought you were a little girl again.'

'Oh, I don't need to forgive you. It is very kind of you, Edward. Am I a little girl, or am I rather old? I can't be quite sure sometimes. I suppose it is because I am fanciful,' said Cara, the tears coming to her eyes in spite of herself.

'Aunt Cherry always said I was. Look, I am going to cry—for nothing at all! You never —th—thought I was so silly,' she said, with a smile on her face, but a childish sob breaking her voice.

'I wish you were with Aunt Cherry again,' said Edward; 'you ought not to be left by yourself here.'

'Oh, I must be here. It is home, and I like it—sometimes. Your mother is very kind to me; and Oswald comes and talks——'

Perhaps it was scarcely possible that Edward should resist this temptation to inquire into Oswald's degree of favour. He was not jealous. No, he thought, he felt sure that he was not jealous; but he was always the second, and no one likes that. He felt a slight passing sting and check when she spoke of Oswald, and in spite of himself could not but feel anxious to find out what degree of intimacy existed between them.

'Do you say this to Oswald? Does he know?' he added.

'I never said anything,' said Cara, recovering herself; 'why should I? it was nonsense. And then Oswald has so much to tell me about *him*—it is much more amusing than to chatter

about one's self. Don't think me very silly, Edward. It was because you seemed to want to know about *me*——'

'So I did,' he said; 'so I do, Cara. It was you and I that used to be the friends. Oswald was bigger, don't you remember? It was always you and I——'

Cara made no direct reply to this representation. She even disregarded the anxious look he gave her, as he made this appeal to old recollections, of which she was not specially thinking at this moment for her part.

'How different people are,' she said. 'Some people tell you about themselves; some make you talk, I don't know how, of *you*. I don't think you would have a good moral effect upon me, Edward. You make me selfish; you make me think of myself. Oswald does not ask about me. He makes me listen to him. Oh, it is very pleasant, and it must be better, I feel sure——'

'You like it better? I am such an uninteresting fellow, Cara, not like Oswald. I prefer to hear about you——'

'Thanks,' she said, with a little shy glance at him, and a slight reddening which she could

not explain. 'Did you think poor Roger very rough and very strange last night? I hope you did not think badly of him. He was, perhaps, a little cross, but he is not like that always, not even often. I don't think I ever saw him so cross before.'

'I understand him, Cara. He was an old friend, too, and he hoped to have you to himself; whereas he found you among still older friends than he was, and intimate, and at your ease. And he was not at all at his ease—I understand him. I have had the very same sort of thing happen to me.'

'With whom?' Cara asked rather abruptly. She was surprised, even slightly nettled, without knowing why. Did Edward know any other girl well enough? she asked herself. It was nothing to her, and yet she was half-displeased.

'Oh, with no one in particular,' he said. 'I have stolen a march upon Oswald,' he added, with a laugh. 'I have had the luck of the early bird. He was always a late fellow. To be sure, he sits up writing when the rest of us go to bed.'

'And is it true that he would not go to India, and put it upon you? I am very fond

of poetry,' said Cara; 'I would rather be a poet than anything else in the world; but not to put the disagreeable work upon someone else—not to please myself at the expense of another——'

'That is not the way to put it, Cara. I am really the one that can go best. Oswald should have a brilliant career at home. He is clever enough to do whatever he pleases, but it is not the same with me. Oh, I am not going in for humility; I can cram for an examination better than he can; it is a humble quality, but it is very serviceable. So we have both the part that suits us best.'

'But you don't like it, Edward.'

'Which of us likes best the special thing he has got to do? We all think something else would be better. Even you, Cara——oh, Heaven knows I did not mean to vex you. Is it I that have brought the tears into your eyes?'

'No,' she said, putting out her hand; 'but it is quite true. I am—out of sorts, I suppose, this morning. I can't help crying; and what you say is quite true. One always thinks something else would be better. Aunt Cherry says the same thing, but different. Edward, I will

try to go to my India as you go to yours—without grumbling——'

'If I had not grumbled, you would not have known anything about it,' he said; 'and, Cara, if you were coming to India I should not grumble. I should be quite reconciled. It is parting from—every one I care for, that makes it so hard to me.'

A kind of crimson reflection had come over Cara's face—not a blush, much more visionary than real—a reflection of a blush: the touch of a vague sentiment which was somehow in the air, and which lighted upon the girl's face because it was more sensitive than the boy's—that was all. But he saw the shadow of a rosy tint over her features, and it moved him with a vague sweetness of fancy, he did not quite know what. If Cara were to go to India—not with him, not as his wife, his thoughts had not gone so far—but if she, too, had to go, in some incomprehensible, delightful way, how the aspect of that banishment would change! All at once, as he sat there, he seemed to see himself looking over the high bulwarks of the ship by her side, the blue water flying in soft ripples behind them, the foam-bubbles dancing on the waves,

the sunshine shining, all the world so new and so sweet. How distinctly he realised the scene, which was just about as likely as that the Queen should go with Edward to India! He came back from that vision as from a long way off, with a half-choking sigh. 'That is nonsense, I suppose. Still it is that, and not India, that vexes me. Parting from those I care for here.'

'And Oswald—would have had that, too.'

'Yes,' said Edward, doubtfully; 'Oswald would have had that, too—but Oswald——'

He stopped, and Cara did not ask him to go on. There was a little doubt in the repetition of the name. 'But Oswald——' What was he going to say? She was too shy, too conscious, to ask. Cara did not blush, even in this shadowy way, when Oswald spoke to her, but she had a vague sense that perhaps he would be pleased to make her blush, would like to move her. She was far more clear-sighted about him than about Edward. Just as she knew her own power over Roger, she knew that Oswald would be pleased to have a like power over herself. She did not discriminate these fine differences of sentiment in

words, but she was aware of them, without attempting definition. She could play upon Roger if she pleased as upon an instrument, and Oswald was trying, and would like to bring music out of her in the same way. She knew this instinctively, and perhaps Cara would not have been very much surprised to be told that Oswald was 'in love' with her; but about Edward she had no insight, no theory. He was kind, and she could talk to him and open her heart; that was all she knew.

Just then they were interrupted by the entrance of Oswald himself, who came in, as he had got into the habit of doing, after his late breakfast. 'Hallo, Ned, you here!' he said, in a tone of surprise. He was not by any means delighted by the appearance of his brother. 'I did not expect to find you occupied so early,' he said to Cara. 'Have you had the bear at your levee, too? I hope he has recovered his temper this morning. If your natives in Berkshire are all of that complexion, Cara, I don't wonder you are glad to get away.'

'Poor Roger! he did not mean to be rude. Did Mrs. Meredith think he was a bear?'

'Oh, my mother! She would not be the universal charmer she is if she was not something of a hypocrite,' said Oswald. 'You may be sure she will not allow that any of her visitors is ever disagreeable. I suppose Ned brought you her message about going out? Then I need not repeat it. And there is to be a tea-drinking to-morrow, Cara, with all sorts of strange beasts—authors and authoresses, and that kind of people. If you will keep close to me I'll tell you who they are. It will be a very funny company.'

'But, Oswald, I thought you were an author, too. Why do you laugh at them? I should have thought there would be sympathy——'

'Wait till you see them,' he said, with a laugh. 'My dear little Cara, there is a great difference always between out-and-out professionals and—other people. A man may indulge in as much literature as he pleases, and it does him no harm—indeed, it may chance to do him a little good. But the people who have nothing but literature to stand upon, that's a different thing altogether; they are generally people who are out of society. Ned, what are you going to do this morning? You don't

mean to say you are wasting your time like an ordinary mortal? You were supposed to have gone to Westminster Hall, or the British Museum, or at the very least, the London Library. See how cheaply some people get a character for virtue! and all the time, Cara, he was amusing himself and talking to you.'

'I am going to work now,' said Édward. 'Remember, this is the first chance I have had of seeing Cara. You are not to sit and think,' he said softly, taking her hand. 'Go to my mother, will you, Cara? Do not stay all the long morning here.'

'I shall not be—dull,' she said, in the same tone, with a grateful, friendly look, which went to Edward's heart. He was comforted, though he had to go away and leave the field clear for his brother, and did so without even the half-painful, half-compunctious feeling as of a grudge which he was ashamed of, which generally moved him when Oswald was concerned. Why should he entertain any grudge at his brother's success? If Oswald was not more agreeable, more bright, more winning than himself, he would not be more popular. But, more than all these reasonings, with which he was fami-

liar, Edward felt the consolation of those discriminating words by which Cara had indicated the difference between himself and his brother —he, who made her talk; Oswald, who talked of himself. This kept him warm all the way to Westminster Hall, or wherever else it was that he went to pursue his studies for the future government of India; but perhaps the way in which he had occupied the first hours of the morning did not make his mind more clear for this much more important subject of thought.

'It is well that there should be one hard-working fellow in the family,' said Oswald, as the door closed, 'for the family's sake; and then it is astonishing what a zest it gives to one's own leisure—like—I suppose I must not quote Latin to you, Cara—like seeing a ship pitching and tossing at sea when one is safe on shore.'

'How can you say so! how dare you say so!' cried Cara, with flashing eyes. 'Oh, what is the good of your poetry and stuff if it only makes you enjoy the sight of another person working—doing what you ought to have done! Is that all the good it is? It ought to be some-

thing pure, something noble, something to make your heart rise——'

'Why, Cara!' cried Oswald, aghast, yet half-laughing. 'Poetry and stuff! is it you who are speaking, or someone else? This is quite a new outbreak for you.'

'I did not mean that,' cried Cara, with the hot blush of youthful shame; 'still, if poetry does not make you more—a man—does not make you stronger and better, and more noble and true——'

'My dear little girl! Poetry is not morals and the Ten Commandments. You have got confused in your reasonings. Come, never mind scolding me, Cara. Listen to this. Your little temper has been put out with your bear last night, and Ned's gravities this morning. You want me to smooth you down again. And I don't like to be scolded. It answers with coarser natures, but I am too sensitive. I want the warm atmosphere of commendation to bring me out. Ask my mother if it has not been ever thus from childhood's hour. Ned can stand it. You may scold him for his good as much as you please—he will like it; but come here, Cara mia. Listen to this——'

'Oh, Oswald!'

'Don't scold me, Cara! Look here. I am just going to send it off to the *Piccadilly*. I shall not be half so sure of it unless my little critic approves. Come, you are not going to be hardhearted. I do want so very much to hear what you think of this.'

He held out the dainty little manuscript, set forth in those irregular lines which are dear to youth. And Cara could not help feeling the pleasure and the grandeur of being his critic, and of hearing the poem read by its author, which was going to be printed, and to live for ever. It glanced across her mind how when Oswald was a great poet, as great as Tennyson or Browning, people would tell how he used to go and read his young verses to a girl whom he had known when he was a child; and this little scene arranged itself historically in her mind as a scene which would make the hearts of other girls beat with secret envy of her, the confidant of a poet. Thus Cara was mollified and yielded, and criticised only the verses, not the poet. Indeed, her criticism of the verses was of the mildest description, just enough to give zest to her almost unbounded praise. And the poet

enjoyed himself greatly reading those innocent lines—which were quite innocent, if somewhat insipid—seeing her absorbed face and soft eyes full of attention, and delighting himself in the melody he had made. How wonderful is this appetite of youth for mere rhyme! Cara listened to each line chiming with the other in a trance of attention. It was as sweet to her as if it had been the truest music, and charmed her very soul.

Oswald went down to the office of the *Piccadilly* afterwards, in great satisfaction with his work. Sometimes these productions brought him in a guinea or two, and then how pleased he was! more pleased than if he had inherited a fortune. He thought himself on the high road to fame and fortune when this happened, and was pleased to let his friends think that he made a good deal of money by his pen. Luckily for him, he did not need to put any dependence upon these dilettante earnings; but they sweetened life to him, if they did not put much money in his purse. And the idea of Cara gave him a soft pleasure. He, too, thought how it might be told hereafter that his first critic was a beautiful girl, and that it was her enthusiasm

which stirred him on to the heights he afterwards attained. 'And what became of the beautiful girl?' he thought he could hear somebody ask in posterity. Yes, indeed! what became of her? Should she marry the poet, and be his muse and his critic combined, or should she be drifted away into some other career, and carry the memory of him with her to her last day, not quite breaking her heart, perhaps, or at least no more than could be mended? He smiled as he went along, with a little conscious warmth on his face, and wondered how this would be.

But just then chance threw something else in his way. He met a procession of school girls—not a very wonderful thing—attended by one or two Sisters of one of the many modern Anglican sisterhoods, in poke bonnets and black veils, decorations which are often very effective when they surround a fair young countenance. Oswald had just caught sight of one which charmed him, and which was enclosed by a poke less rigid, and a veil less heavy than the others, which he concluded to mean novicehood, or even mere associateship. The owner of this soft serious face was too young to have made

any permanent choice of so grave a kind, and was, indeed, only a governess to whom a modification of the conventual dress had been permitted as a privilege. Oswald crossed the road, and went along very demurely, though it was not his way, parallel with the procession, looking furtively, and, as he flattered himself, with purely artistic admiration, at the little shepherdess of the flock. 'She is a Perugino,' he said to himself, and already the ready verses began to flutter to his lips. He would write a poem about her; she was the most charming subject—a true Perugino, with just that warm glow of colour, not fair but mellow—those soft features, those modest eyes. He began on the spot:—

> From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung,
> Fair face! that thus so sweetly can combine
> The maiden and the mother ever young—

(The reader will perceive that Oswald's verses were not of the highest quality.) He had got just this length when a sudden shriek disturbed him. The little procession was crossing a side street, and one of the younger children had made a rush from her companion, and in a moment, before anyone could draw a breath, had

been knocked down and apparently crushed by a cart which came lumbering slowly up the street, too slow and too heavy to alarm anyone. Oswald, to do him justice, was not given to mooning when there was any need for active service. He rushed across the street, reaching the scene of the disaster before anyone else, except his Perugino, who had flown with one small cry, and was herself half under the heavy cart, pushing it back with all her force, while the others stood aghast and shrieked, not knowing what to do. Nothing could be more swift, more ready, than the Perugino novice. She had already drawn the child half into her arms before Oswald reached the spot, and was feeling the little limbs all over, with a little panting cry, half horror, half want of breath. 'Let me carry the child to the nearest doctor,' cried Oswald. The colour had all gone out of the Perugino face—the big wheel of the cart touching her delicate shoulder made a background for her; she was a St. Catherine now. 'There is something broken; she must go to the hospital,' the girl said, looking up at him with that sudden acquaintance and confidence which comes in such a moment. Her shoulder brushed

against him as she transferred the little burden to him. The child had fainted. He took the poor little crushed creature in his arms. They were within a stone's throw of the great hospital, and there was nothing to be done but to carry it there. The elder Sister by this time had joined them, sending the curious, anxious, crying girls away under the charge of the remaining governess. 'Agnes, you ought to go back with them. You are as white as a sheet. You will faint,' said the Sister, putting an arm round the girl.

'Oh, no; I am better. Let me go and see what it is,' she said.

Agnes? Was that the name? It was one of the saints, he had felt sure.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TELLING TALES.

'ROGER has been to pay dear Cara a visit,' said Mrs. Burchell. 'He was in London on Sunday with his kind aunt, at Notting Hill, and he thought he would call. I don't approve of Sunday visits, but I suppose exceptions must be made sometimes, and Roger went; knowing her all his life, you know, he felt interested. Do you know a family called Meredith, Miss Charity? I should not think, from what he tells me of them, that they can be people you would care to know.'

'Meredith! but of course you know them, Aunt Charity—poor Annie's friend, whom she was so fond of—the only person who was allowed to come in when she was ill—the most delightful, kind woman.'

'People change as years go on; and Cherry is always enthusiastic—gushing, as my young

people say. But do you know, Miss Charity, that poor Mr. Beresford is always there? dining there on Sunday; sitting till one does not know how late; and she is a woman separated from her husband,' said Mrs. Burchell, lowering her voice. 'I am sure that is a thing of which you cannot approve.'

'Of women separating from their husbands?' Miss Charity was sitting in her dressing-gown, in her bedroom, by the fire. She had been laid up by 'one of her attacks.' This was how everybody spoke of it; and though she was completely out of danger, it was necessary to take care. The consequence was that she lived in her bedroom, and chiefly in her dressing-gown, and was sometimes fretful, hard to manage, and a strain upon Miss Cherry's powers. Almost any visitor, who would come and bring a little variety, and particularly a little news, was an advantage; therefore Cherry was very reluctant to interfere with what Mrs. Burchell said, especially as she was hungering for news of the child who, though she wrote so regularly, did not say half what Miss Cherry wanted to hear.

'I can't pronounce on such a question with-

out knowing the circumstances,' said Miss Charity. 'Women are fools, but then so are most men as well.'

'Oh, Miss Charity! that is one of your quaint ways of stating things. Mr. Burchell always says you have such quaint ways of expressing yourself; but always judicious, quite above what could be expected from a woman.'

'Mr. Burchell is a good judge; he has means of knowing what may be expected from a woman,' said the old lady, sharply. 'And so you think badly of Mrs. Meredith? But make your mind easy; she is not separated from her husband.'

'*Not!*' Mrs. Burchell echoed the negative in a tone which was faint with disappointment. 'Oh, but pardon me, I fear you must be mistaken, for Roger says——'

'I thought that boy was a nice boy. What have you done to him to make him a gossip? Cherry, that was the one I thought well of, was it not? The others were naught, except Agnes; but this was a nice boy.'

'Agnes is very self-willed,' said Mrs. Burchell; 'she is gone to that mission, though I am sure there is plenty to do at home and in

the parish. I don't know what to say to her. But as for the others being naught, I don't think it is very kind of you to say so,' she added, looking as if she meant to cry.

'It is only one of my quaint ways of expressing myself,' said Miss Charity, grimly. 'I hate a boy who is a gossip. It is bad enough in girls; but then one is sorry for the poor things that have nothing better to do. What does this boy of yours say? If he was my boy, I'd whip him for tale-telling. And what was he doing in the Square?'

'My children have always been brought up to confide in their mother,' said Mrs. Burchell, on the verge of tears; 'they have always told me their impressions. Thank Heaven, though my lot is not luxurious like some people's, I have always had comfort in my children.'

'That is a hit at you and me, Cherry, who have no children,' said the old lady, who was sharp and keen after her illness. 'My dear, we are quite willing to admit your superiority. What did the boy say?'

'I am sure there was no boasting in my mind. I have very little occasion to boast. A poor clergyman's wife, with so large a family to

bring up! but I *am* proud of the confidence of my children. Dear Roger went to see Cara out of kindness. He has always had a kind feeling to her, and the poor boy's heart was quite touched to see her among such people. They seem to live in an ungodly way, with dinner-parties on Sunday, and that sort of thing—no regard for poor servants or for the bad example they are setting. And as for the lady, Roger did not tell me all; but he says Mr. Beresford *stays*—stays after Cara goes home, and, in short, is never out of the house. I felt that you ought to be told. Gentlemen have very peculiar ideas, I know—they don't follow our rules; but for a man to take his daughter, his young daughter, into such society——'

'Maria!' Miss Cherry was speechless with horror and dismay. She managed to get out this ejaculation, and no more. But the old lady was less easily moved. She put on the spectacles to which she had taken quite lately, and looked into her visitor's face.

'Here is an odd thing now,' she said, 'a very odd thing. I am willing to suppose you are an innocent sort of woman, Maria Burchell. You never did anything very bad—for one

thing, you have never been tempted—and yet you are ready to believe any evil, at the first word, of another woman whom you know nothing in the world about. It is the oddest thing I know. If you had been a wicked person, one could have understood it. But a clergyman's wife, as you say, in a quiet country place, out of the way of temptation—why, you ought to think well of everybody! You ought to be the sort of person who could be taken in, who would not believe harm of anyone, an innocent woman like you!'

'Am I an innocent woman?' said Mrs. Burchell, shaking her head, with a sad smile. The distinction, if flattering to her moral character, was derogatory to her dignity. 'Ah, how little we know each other! and what is called charity is so often mere laxness of principle. I hope I know the depravity of my own heart.'

'In that case, my dear, there's nothing more to be said,' said Miss Charity, briskly, only that you ought not to come here under false pretences, taking us all in, and looking respectable, as you do. But, however bad you may be, Mrs. Meredith is not bad. I don't know much about the husband; perhaps they don't

get on together very well. Perhaps it is health. She lives here, and he lives there—that is all I know; but she is a better woman than I am; that I'll answer for. How she can put up with that fool of a nephew of mine, I can't tell. He is very learned, I grant, and a fellow of half the societies. Well, and so your boy said——? What is the woman crying for, I would like to know?'

'Oh!' wept Mrs. Burchell, 'I never thought to have lived to be so spoken to; and by an old friend. Oh, Cherry! you that have known me from a girl, how can you sit still and do your knitting, and hear me talked to so?'

'She does not mean it,' said Miss Cherry, softly, 'dear Maria! She has been ill. She can't help being a little irritable.'

'Stuff!' said Miss Charity. 'She brought it on herself. Go away, Cherry; if I were irritable, it is you who would feel it first. Now, Maria, don't be more of a fool than you can help. What did the boy say?'

Miss Cherry went back to her knitting, with a suppressed sigh. It was very true that it was she who paid the penalty first; but to see anybody crying troubled the kind soul. She gave

a kind little pat as she passed to Mrs. Burchell's fat shoulders. She was knitting a huge white shawl in thick wool, to keep the old lady warm, and her own slight person was half lost in its folds.

But there was not very much more to be got from Mrs. Burchell. The boy had not, indeed, said any more, nor so much as she had reported. He had been betrayed by the sore state of his feelings, poor Roger, to give a very slight sketch of his uncomfortable Sunday—how he did not think the lady to whom Mr. Beresford talked so earnestly, who had a husband, and yet had no husband—who asked people to dinner on Sunday, and who—but Roger did not say this—had two sons who interfered so uncomfortably with his own inclinations—was at all a good friend for Cara. This was the extent of Roger's confidence, and he regretted bitterly having given it before the evening was out; for it is one thing to disburden your heart of a grievance, and quite another to have that grievance enlarged and embittered by constant reference and repetition. He heard so much of it before he left the Rectory that evening that he was furious with himself for having betrayed his wound, and felt ashamed of it, and guilty so

far as Cara was concerned. Therefore, Mrs. Burchell was rather glad of the personal offence which concealed the fact that she had very little to say. It had given a great zest to her visit that she had Roger's news to tell; but there was much less detail than she could have desired, so she dropped into her own personal grievance about Agnes, who had insisted on going to the mission-house to teach, when there was plenty to do at home; but neither of the ladies entered warmly into it, Agnes being a greater favourite with them than her mother. When she was gone, however, Miss Charity fell into a musing. Age had crept a little, just a little, upon her. She was no longer the vigorous woman, of no particular age, whom Dr. Maxwell had commended as a type of womankind. Winter is unfavourable to the human frame when it approaches seventy. With a soft, perpetual summer, never blazing, as it is in the south, and chequered by no chilly gales, would it be necessary that threescore and ten should be man's limit, or that we should ever die? Miss Charity felt the unkindly influence of the winter. When summer came back she would be all right again—or so, at least, she thought.

'It is amazing, the ill people have in their thoughts,' she said, at last. 'That woman, with her "laxness of principle" and her depraved heart, and her indignation to be taken at her word! Now, Cherry, that was an inoffensive girl enough. When she was Maria Thompson there was no particular harm in her. I believe we ought all to die at twenty. What a deal of mischief it would save the world.'

'And good, too,' said Miss Cherry, in her soft voice.

'Good! not so much good. Do you know, I don't feel comfortable about Mrs. Meredith. I know she's a nice woman; but, bless my soul, the number of nice women I have known, who have been—no better than they should be! And Cara, you know—Cara is our business, Cherry; we are her nearest relations. I do believe she would be better here. Nobody can say that you are—no better than you should be. You don't form friendships with men. I daresay that's all Mrs. Meredith's sin at bottom.'

'But that is only,' said Miss Cherry, composedly, 'because there are no men to form friendships with. You may laugh, Aunt Charity; but I say quite what I mean. I am

not a young girl—neither is Mrs. Meredith. If she is good to my poor brother James, shouldn't we be grateful? And as for Cara—though Heaven knows how much I would give to have her back again——'

'Who is that at the door? I won't see any more people—that woman has put me out for the day. Though I know it is nonsense, I can't get it out of my head. She is a great deal too fond of being popular. She is——. Whom do you say? Mr. Maxwell? to be sure, it is his day. Well, I suppose he must come in, of course. And just as well; we can ask him, and set it to rest.'

Mr. Maxwell came in, as he had done regularly every week for no one knew how many years. He was redder and rustier, and perhaps a trifle stouter; but that did not show to familiar eyes. Otherwise, the five years which had elapsed since Mrs. Beresford's death had made no alteration in the doctor. He was on that tableland in the middle of life when five years tell less than at any other period. He came in with the slight bustle which was characteristic of him, and sat down by Miss Charity, and got through quickly that little

confidential talk which is necessary between a doctor and his patient, during which Miss Cherry took her big piece of work to the window, and stood there, holding the mass of white wool in her arms, and knitting on, with her back towards the others. When this formula had been gone through she returned to her chair. Her interest in the matter was too great to allow even her aunt to open it. 'Have you seen my brother James lately?' she said.

'Your brother James!' The question seemed to startle and confuse the doctor. 'We have seen very little of each other these five years.'

'Ah! I thought you were not so intimate,' said Miss Cherry, whom the suspicion had pained. 'Is there—any reason? I should like so much to know.'

'Well! I suppose there always is some reason or other. But no—estrangements come by accident constantly, Miss Cherry. I can't tell what is the reason. I don't suppose I know. We have drifted apart, that's all; people do so every day without knowing why.'

'People know when it begins,' said Miss Cherry, eagerly; but here she was interrupted by her aunt.

'Never mind about estrangements. What

we want to ask you, Mr. Maxwell, is whether you have seen Cara, little Cara, you remember? and also something about their neighbours. There is Mrs. Meredith, for instance. We hear she sees a great deal of them. Eh! why shouldn't I tell Mr. Maxwell exactly what we have heard? A doctor isn't a tale-bearer; he'd lose all his practice in a week. We've been disturbed by hearing (especially Cherry; she is more particular than I) something about Mrs. Meredith. You, that know everything, tell us if it is true.'

'I have seen very little of Mrs. Meredith. I don't know much about James. Cara would be a great deal better here. What does he want with the child in London? he doesn't require her; he has done without her all these years. I'd have her back, Miss Charity, if I were you.'

'It is very easy to talk of having her back. She is his child after all. Come, speak out; they say James is there constantly—and that this lady—she isn't separated from that husband of hers, eh?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Not that you know of! Of course you know whatever there is to know. What is the matter? A woman should not let herself be talked of.

'Mrs. Meredith is not talked of, if that is what you mean; but I have heard that James is constantly there. He oughtn't to do it. If he is fond of her, as I don't doubt he is fond of her——'

'Mr. Maxwell, how can you speak so of my brother?' said Miss Cherry, agitated and blushing, with the tears ready to come. 'A married woman! I am sure he has no more thought of anything of the kind. What has his life been since Annie died? That speaks for itself; he has thought of no one but her.'

'Hold your tongue, Cherry, my dear. You are an old maid; but you have a foolish young soul. What do you know of such things? Let us talk it over quietly. Now, Mr. Maxwell, you need not be upon p's and q's with me. If he is fond of her? that is the question. Nothing but what is innocent, you goose. We don't think James a bad man, do you suppose? Now, doctor, we must be at the bottom of it, now we have opened the question. What do people say?'

'*I* say—if he is fond of her, he oughtn't to compromise her, Miss Charity; that is all about it. Innocent! of course it's all innocent enough; but the woman *is* married, and her husband is thousands of miles off, and he ought to have

more sense than to go there every evening, as he does. Yes, we've talked of it among ourselves; not to let it go any further; not to make any scandal, Heaven knows. No one thinks of any scandal; but he oughtn't to do it. I am not blaming your brother, Miss Cherry; he has fallen into it, poor fellow, without knowing. He and I are not such friends as we were. I have thought I had reason not to be quite pleased with him; but I don't do him injustice here. He means no harm; but he oughtn't to do it. The more he is fond of her, the more he ought to take care. And there you have my opinion, and that's all about it. I don't think anyone has ever ventured to say more.'

'It is too much to have said,' said the old lady, 'and she ought to know better. I don't put it all on him. She ought to have put a stop to it. Women see these things better than men; and besides, it is the women who suffer, not the men. She ought to have put a stop to it. I don't put it all on him, as you seem disposed to do.'

'How could she put a stop to it?' said the doctor, warmly. 'She is good to everybody. She opened her house to him when he was mi-

serable. How is a woman to say to a man, after she has been kind to him, "Don't come any more; people are beginning to talk?" Good Lord! it would be like supposing they had some reason to talk. If any woman said that to me I should feel that she thought me a brute bad enough for anything. No, no; everybody says women are hardest upon each other——'

'Everybody says a deal of nonsense,' said Miss Charity, sharply. 'A woman does not need to speak so plainly. She can let the man see when he is going too far without a word said. How? oh, there's no need to tell *you* how. We know how, that's enough. She could have done it, and she ought to have done it. Still, I don't think any harm of her; and it must simply be put a stop to, now we know.'

'Ah!' said the doctor, drawing a long breath, 'but how?'

'How, again? Why, what kind of people are you who call yourselves their friends? It's your business to do it. Cherry, my dear, I am a deal better; the bronchitis is all gone, and Barbara is as careful of me as a woman can be. You'll go off directly to the Square. If I were well enough, if it were not for this stupid bronchitis, I'd go myself; but it isn't

worth a life; is it, doctor? See how things are going on. Of course you won't make any fuss, Cherry; but whatever ought to be done you'll do.'

Maxwell turned, as the old lady made this address to her niece, and looked at her. What would poor old Cherry do? he said to himself, watching her with curiosity and wonder. Was she a person to face this dilemma, which had kept various and more determined persons in difficulty? She let her work drop upon her knee, and looked up with an agitated face. She grew pale and red, and pale again.

'How am I to speak to James?' she said, hurriedly catching her breath—'a man!'

Then she made a pause and an effort, and the doctor, astonished, saw a soft light of resolution come into the mild old maiden's face.

'Of course,' she said, still a little breathless, 'I will not think of that if there is anything I can do.'

'And of course there is something to do!' said the more energetic old lady. 'My patience! what do people get old for, doctor? I should do it without thinking twice. What do they say about a sound mind in a sound body? I wish, for my own part, when an old woman gets bronchitis, she could get it in her soul as well, and be all bad together. But for

this old body, I'm as strong as ever I was; and Cherry was always weakly, poor dear.'

'Do not vex yourself, Aunt Charity; I will go,' said Miss Cherry, with only a slight faltering in her voice. 'Mrs. Meredith is a good woman, and my brother James is a good man too, though I wish he was more religious. When a thing is plain duty, that makes it—easy; well, if not easy, at least——. I will do my best,' she said, softly. Mr. Maxwell watched her quite intently. It was all very well to say this here; but would she venture to do it? He had always taken an interest in Cherry, more or less. All these years, during which he had come weekly to the Hill, he had been always sensible when Cherry was not there, and had a way of looking round for her grey gown when he came in. Everybody knew his way of looking round, but no one, much less the chief person concerned, had ever divined that it was that grey garment which he missed when it was not there. Poor faded, fluttering, nervous Cherry; he had always taken an interest in her; would she really have the courage to take this bold, independent step, and do the thing which not one of James Beresford's friends had dared to do?

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HOLY INQUISITION.

Miss Cherry's sudden arrival at the Square was a sudden surprise to everybody, and, like most surprises, was not quite successful for the moment. She arrived in the afternoon, when Cara was out with Mrs. Meredith, and when her appearance with her box excited no small astonishment among the servants, who were quite unprepared for a visitor. And Miss Cherry was nervous and self-conscious, feeling her mission in every nerve, though all the rest of the world remained unaware of what she had come to do. When she had seen her things deposited in the spare room, and had been served with the unfailing cup of tea in poor Annie's drawing-room, the sight of which, after so long, cost her some tears, she detained Nurse, who had brought this refreshment to her, to make

what gentle preliminary investigations she could manage without exciting any suspicion.

'Is Miss Cara happy, do you think? Does she like being with her papa? It must be a great change to her, Nurse. Of course, a child ought to be happy with her father; but—and then to change all at once from the country, and at this time of the year. Oh, Nurse! I hope my dear child is happy. You know how she was thought of at the Hill,' said Miss Cherry, who was weeping-ripe, and scarcely could keep down the tears.

'Well, ma'am, for happy I can't say; but she keeps her 'elth,' said Nurse; 'that is what I've got most to do with. I don't think as there's much to brag of in the mornings, when she's here by herself. If I was master I'd get out of this house, Miss Cherry, and I'd pull this room to pieces, and change everything. That's why he can't abide to come in here. It's almost as bad as if my poor lady was a-lying here in state still, though it's five years and more since she was took from us. It's all as I can do myself to keep steady when I sees all her things, as she took such pride in; and master he can't stand it—and I don't wonder. But it ought to

be changed. When the young gentlemen comes in, then Miss Cara brightens up——'

'The young gentlemen, Nurse?'

'The Mr. Merediths, ma'am, from next door. Mr. Edward has but just come back; but Mr. Oswald has been here regular, almost every day, and that cheers up a young lady——'

'But, Nurse——!' Cherry said, with a gasp, and could say no more.

'Yes, ma'am—I allow as it's running a risk,' said Nurse, very gravely; 'but what is a person to say? If there was a lady to take the charge—but master pays no attention. I don't think as he ever notices who comes and who goes.'

'But, oh! why didn't I know?' cried Cherry. 'Such a state of affairs ought not to have been permitted for a day.'

'No more it didn't ought to, Miss Cherry; but what can a person do? I've said a word now and again, when I've had an opportunity, about the deceitfulness of young men, and as how young ladies had best pay no heed to them—when I could, you know, ma'am. But whether them warnings is ever any good I'm not the one to say. A young lady like Miss Cara never thinks that it can be her as is meant.

Even me, I can remember, though but a poor girl, it was always in my mind, as I was the exception, and there couldn't be no question of deceiving with me.'

'Oh, deceiving!' said Cherry; 'that is not the question; but Cara is with her papa in the evenings? That must be a comfort to him, and to her too, poor child.'

Nurse gave a little cough. 'Master—mostly—spends the evening out,' she said.

Miss Cherry did not ask any more; her suspicions were all confirmed and her anxieties increased; for though there was no question of deceiving in nurse's sense of the word, and though that good woman's homilies no doubt fell quite harmless upon Cara, yet the visits of a couple of young men to a girl 'almost every morning' conveyed an idea of danger which made Miss Cherry's hair stand on end. What the poor child had been plunged into the moment she left that safe feminine nest at the Hill, all flowery and sweet, where some kind guardian was always at hand! Launched into the world—never words could be more true. Miss Cherry sat in the haunted room, where poor Cara felt her mother's eyes upon her, so

full of pondering that she had no leisure to be affected by that memory. The poor woman, who was dead and safe, died away out of all thoughts when the affairs of the living came uppermost—the living who were so far from being safe, whose life lay before them, liable to be coloured through and through by the events of any solitary moment. This could scarcely be said of James Beresford perhaps, whose life was three-parts over; but what penalties might not Cara have to pay for the pleasure of the moment!—the gay visitors who 'brightened her up' might leave darkness behind when their more active life carried them away to other scenes and occupations, and the companionship which made this opening of her existence cheerful might throw all the rest into shadow. So Miss Cherry, whose life knew nothing more than this, who had no varied experiences to show how one affection pushed out another, and on what lines of natural progress the course of life was drawn, thought to herself as she waited by the side of the fire, slowly sipping her cup of tea, for Cara's return. She thought no more of her brother and Mrs. Meredith—people who were old enough to

manage their own concerns. Cara occupied all her thoughts. She was herself, though she was old, more on Cara's level of life than on that which was occupied by the kind neighbour for whom she had been so anxious when she came. After a while she heard voices outside, and going to the window, saw a little group at the house next door, the centre of which was Mrs. Meredith herself, smiling graciously upon someone who had arrived too early for her usual reception, and who was going disappointed away, when stopped by her arrival. Behind Mrs. Meredith was Cara, looking up to a handsome, dark-haired young man, who smiled upon her in a way which gave even to old Miss Cherry's heart a sympathetic thrill. Surely he looked sincere, she said to herself; and what girl could resist such a look? For a moment Cherry forgot her terror and her precautions. Why should not Cara be the one happy girl whose happy love was to be blessed and sanctioned by everybody from the very beginning? Why should it not be so? Cherry asked herself. There was money enough in the family to make it possible to indulge this only child of their hearts in whatever she might

please to want—a husband if she liked, or any other toy. It was not, however, with such light-minded expressions that Cherry treated so solemn a subject. If he loved her, and if she loved him, why should there be any difficulty? Cherry herself was ready to give up everything to 'secure' her darling's 'happiness.' These were the words to use:—'To secure Cara's happiness!' Then there need be no question of danger or trouble of any kind. The young couple would be married quite young, as it was for everybody's happiness (people said) to be, and there need be no further anxiety, no further pain, on Cara's account. They did not see her at the window, but stood talking, close together, the girl looking up, the young man looking down, until the door was opened, and they all disappeared. Cherry went back to her seat at the fireside and cried a little for pleasure at the thought of this happiness which was to come. To think of your child having precisely the blessedness, the good-fortune, which has not fallen to you, and which would have made you more happy than anything else,—could there be compensation more sweet? She cried for pleasure as she had cried before for anxiety,

and sat with the firelight sparkling in that moisture which filled her eyes, and calculated how it could be done. Mrs. Meredith would allow her son something—as much at least as his school and university allowance, if not more; and though Aunt Charity was careful of her money, she could be liberal, too, on occasion. I am not sure even that it did not flash across Miss Cherry's mind that one day the Hill and all its wealth would be her own; but she repulsed the thought with poignant compunction: unless, indeed, it might be that the Hill should go at once to Cara, and thus make her marriage, as of a queen-regnant able to endow her husband plentifully, the most wise and seemly thing in the world, even though she was so young. After all her troubles and terrors, Miss Cherry had a moment of exquisite pleasure as she sat by the fire and arranged it all. She forgot that the room was haunted, she forgot her sister-in-law's strange death, her brother's long misery, and now the consolation which he had found, and which all his friends disapproved of, and she herself had come here to put a stop to. What were all these things in comparison with Cara happy,

Cara blessed in that best and sweetest lot which had never come to herself? What matter, if it came to her dearest child?

She had plenty of time to indulge these thoughts, for her dearest child was a long time coming, and but for her delightful dreams Miss Cherry might have felt somewhat dull and deserted in the still house. If she could but look through the partition and see into the drawing-room next door!—just a peep, to see her Cara with that charming young man beside her, bending over her. They were like a pair in a novel, Miss Cherry felt, or in a poem, which was better still—she, with those great blue eyes, which were Cara's chief feature; he, dark and splendid, with a glow of manly colour. How nice that he should be so handsome! For indeed sometimes girls are quite pleased and happy with those who are not handsome, so that this was something *pardessus le marché*, an exceptional advantage. Some one began to play the piano after a while, and the sound came through the wall. Was it perhaps *he*? Cara could not play so well as that. If it was he, then he must be accomplished too, as well as handsome. What a happy, happy girl!

Though Miss Cherry was a little tired of waiting before Cara came in, she had not at all flagged in her enthusiasm, and when the girl flew to her, all flushed and excited with pleasure at the sight of her, it was all she could do to restrain her congratulations and blessings. 'For I must not say a word till she gives me her confidence,' she said to herself.

'Nurse told me as she let me in that you were here. Oh, Aunt Cherry, how glad I am! When did you come? Why did you not send for me? Here I have been waiting nearly an hour at Mrs. Meredith's, and you here!'

'My darling, you were happier there——'

'Happier than with you? I was happier than when I am alone; but if I had known you were here! And, oh! Aunt Cherry, there is only time to get ready for dinner! We can't talk just now; how provoking it is! Tell me about Aunt Charity and home; but we must not keep dinner waiting.'

'No, dear. How pleased I am,' said Miss Cherry, kissing her child with tender fondness, 'to see you so considerate and careful of your papa's comfort?'

'Yes,' said Cara, doubtfully. 'Papa, of

course—but it is more for cook and John; they don't like to have dinner kept waiting. Papa is often a little late himself, but of course no one could say anything to him.'

This explanation was made as they went upstairs arm-in-arm, the girl clinging to her aunt with pretty fondness, embracing Miss Cherry's arm with both her hands. Cara was paler than she had been at the Hill. Her eyes looked bigger and bluer than ever, her transparent complexion more delicate and changeable. She was prettier than Miss Cherry had ever seen her, but 'did not look strong,' her anxious aunt thought. Was it the excitement of her position, the absorbing influence which had taken hold of her? How kind Cherry longed to take the child in her arms to beg for her confidence! 'But I must not say a word till she tells me,' she said to herself, with a sigh.

Mr. Beresford took his sister's arrival very calmly. He accepted her halting explanation of her sudden visit to town with the calm of indifference. When he had said he was glad to see her, had he not said all that was necessary? Miss Cherry's excuse was the dentist, that scourge yet blessing of middle-aged folks. And

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Cara, too, accepted the explanation with calmness though not with indifference. She led her back to the drawing-room after dinner with a light-hearted playfulness, unlike her usual gravity.

'How nice it is to have someone sitting opposite,' she said. 'Everything looks so cheerful to-night. And now we can talk.'

'Yes, Cara, as much as you please; and when your papa comes upstairs——'

'Oh, papa never comes upstairs, Aunt Cherry. He does not like this room. Mrs. Meredith has made him come two or three times to try and get him used to it; but he never looks happy here.'

'Then you go down to the library and sit with him there?'

'Ought I to do that? He never said so, and I did not like to do it out of my own head. And then he goes out ——'

'How lonely for you, my darling.'

'Yes, it is lonely. Sometimes I feel a little frightened. It is so quiet; listen!' said the girl, drawing nearer to her companion's side. 'I don't mind to-night when you are here; but there is not a sound—Cook and John shut all the doors

to keep the house quiet for papa; but, oh! I should be so glad sometimes if I could hear them in the kitchen for company! I know it is very silly. Why should I be afraid? No one could come here but mamma, and she would never do harm to me, only good; and yet I feel sometimes as if I could not bear it. How is it, I wonder? This is London, and the Hill is the country; but one always heard something stirring there.'

'My dearest!' said kind Miss Cherry, crying over her; 'my own child! If I had known, if I could have thought you were left so much to yourself! But, dear, you see a great deal of the people next door. That must cheer you up: tell me about them. There is Mrs. Meredith—she used to be a very nice woman; are you fond of her, Cara? And then there are her sons ——'

'Very fond,' said Cara, with composure; 'and the boys are kind. They come often in the morning to see me. I am not sure which of them I like best. Edward has just come home. He is the one that is going to India; and Oswald writes poetry and is very clever. I go out with Mrs. Meredith in the afternoon—

you must not think I am not very fond of her, Aunt Cherry—but then she is fond of so many people. You should see her afternoons. She is at home always at five, and the number of people who come! and she looks at them all alike, and listens to them as if she thought of no one else. Yes, I am very fond of her; but I like people to belong to me, not to everybody —like you, Aunt Cherry; you are mine, mine!' the girl cried, with the flattery of exclusive appropriation which is so sweet to all, and especially to those who are beyond the first fascinations of life.

'Yes, my darling,' said Miss Cherry, with tears in her soft eyes; 'me, and everything I have and everything I am, to do whatever you please with.' She had a right to be more lavish than any lover in her self-offering; for no love could have been so ready to give up will and wish, which are the last things any human creature likes to sacrifice, for the sake of the beloved. Miss Cherry would have allowed herself to be cut into little pieces at any moment, for the sake of the child.

But these were not the kind of confidences she expected. She made an effort to bring

Cara back to the other ground, and to elicit from her some tender confession. Romantic old Cherry was disappointed not to have seen some trace of this confidence, irrepressible, eager to unbosom itself, but she was not hopeless of it still.

'I saw you go in,' she said. 'I watched you from the window, Cara. Was that one of the Merediths that was with you?—Very nice-looking, rather dark. Which was that? You seemed to be great friends.'

'This afternoon! Were you at the window? How stupid I was not to see you! I will never come near the house again without looking up at the windows. It was Oswald, Aunt Cherry; he is always the one who has time to go out with us. Do you think a man ought to have so much time? Yes, he is nice-looking, I think; he *is* like a poet; and he is the one who chiefly stands by me, and comes to see me in the morning. He never seems to have anything particular to do,' Cara added, with a slight air of vexation, which raised Miss Cherry's hopes.

'But if he writes?' she said, with a little awe.

'Ah, he does that at night; he sits up writing, and all day long he seems just to do what he likes. They laugh at him for it, but he never minds. Mrs. Meredith sometimes says—— Ah!' cried Cara, stopping short, and drawing a long sighing breath. A sort of muffled hollow sound went through the house—the shutting of the great hall-door, which seemed to vibrate upwards from floor to floor.

'What is it, Cara?' said Miss Cherry, whose nerves were weak, and who jumped at any noise, even when she knew really what it was.

'It is papa going out,' said Cara, with a little sigh; and then ensued a momentary silence, which showed that this mighty event was of importance to her and inspired her imagination. 'But I do not mind to-night,' she added, with soft sudden laughter, putting her hands together with an infantile movement of pleasure, 'when I have you!'

They sat and talked the whole evening through, with that fertility of communication which exists between people who have very little to tell, and yet are in perfect confidence with each other. What did they say? not

much of any consequence. Miss Cherry told Cara all the news of the Hill, and Cara confided to Miss Cherry without meaning, or being aware of it, a hundred small details of her life, chiefly repetitions of what she had already said, yet throwing fresh light upon those simple monotonous dull days, which were so interesting to the elder lady. But not all Miss Cherry's delicate leadings up to the point could win any confidential statement from the girl of the character her aunt had expected to hear. She was all confidence, and told everything without keeping back a thought; but there was nothing of this description to tell; and Miss Cherry was at last obliged to acknowledge it to herself with great disappointment. 'There has been no explanation yet,' she said to herself. She was not the first who has been disappointed by finding that a supposed romance had no existence. They sat quite late, till Miss Cherry, used to early hours, began to droop and get weary; but even after this feeling had crept over her eyes, and betrayed her into a yawn or two, she sat still, heroically waiting for her brother's return.

'When does your papa come in? Is he not late to-night?' she said at last, when her

endurance had nearly reached its limits. She would have suffered any hardship for her darling, but the habits of her early innocent country life were strong upon her, and to stay up till midnight seemed almost immoral to Miss Cherry; still more immoral it seemed to her, however, to go to bed, without bidding your host good-night.

'I think he is always late; but no one waits up for him,' said Cara. 'I never see him after dinner. Have I tired you out talking? I go to bed early,' said the little girl, with a forlorn look, 'because it is so dull; but I am so happy to-night. Oh, I wish you would never go away any more.'

'My darling, I thought you had a great deal better company than me.'

'Ah, but you were mistaken, you see. Sometimes I have very nice company though, when we dine with the Merediths. She asks us every week, and sometimes I go out to parties with her, which are pleasant. But it is very dull the other nights,' said Cara, with unconscious pathos; 'and the only thing I can do to amuse myself is to go to bed.'

She laughed, but it was not a cheerful laugh.

And was it possible that on the other side of the partition her father was sitting, whose poor little daughter had nothing better to do to amuse herself than to go to bed? What could James mean by such conduct? It was very hard for Cherry to be just in such strange circumstances, and not to blame, as most people would have done, the woman who was concerned. Visions of ill-names, such as 'elderly siren,' which innocent Miss Cherry had read in the papers, drifted into her simple brain in spite of herself. Why did she let him do it? Why did she encourage him to go to her? What were they talking about? Miss Cherry, though she was so sleepy, could not really rest, even after she went to bed, till she heard once more that dull sound through the house of the great door shutting. The houses in the Square were well built for London houses, and the corresponding sounds in the house next door, when the visitor departed, did not reach the watcher's ears. But it was with some anxiety in her thoughts that Miss Cherry wondered how the sons liked it, and what they thought of their mother's constant visitor: and she a married woman: and James still making believe to feel his wife's loss

so deeply that he could not enter his drawing-room without pain! Miss Cherry blushed in the darkness, throwing a warm reflection upon the pillow, if there had been any light to show it, over this thought.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PERUGINO.

Oswald Meredith had a new direction given to his thoughts. He was not, as may be easily divined, so clever as Cara gave him credit for being, nor, indeed, as his family supposed, who knew him better than Cara did; but he was full of fancy and a kind of gay, half-intellectual life which might be called poetic so far as it went. His head was full of the poets, if not of poetry; and a certain joyous consciousness of existence and of well-being which made his own pursuits and enjoyments beautiful and important to him, was in all he did and said. He was not so much selfish as self-occupied, feeling a kind of glory and radiance about his youth, and conscious freedom and conscious talents which elated him, without any absolute vanity or self-love. Naturally all the people who were equally self-occupied, or whose temperaments ran coun-

ter to Oswald's, took it for granted that he was vain and selfish; and those who loved him best were often impatient with him for this happy contentment, which made him pleased with his own aimless ways, and indifferent to everything that demanded any exertion which would interfere with the smooth current of his enjoyable and enjoying life. For himself he was too good-natured to criticise or find fault with anyone—having no ideal himself to derange his satisfaction with his own circumstances and behaviour, he had no ideal for others, and was quite content that they, too, should enjoy themselves as they pleased, and find each for himself the primrose paths which suited him best; but he did not inquire into the primrose paths of others. He was so pleased with his own, so ready to tell everybody how delightful it was, how he enjoyed it, what pretty fancies it abounded in, and pleasant intercourse, and merry sunshiny ways. For Edward, who worked, he had the kindest toleration, as for an odd fellow who found his pleasure that way; and his mother, who sympathised with everybody, he regarded also with half-laughing, satisfied eyes as one whose peculiar inclinations laid her open to a charge of 'hum-

bug,' which, perhaps, was not quite without foundation. Let everybody follow their own way: that was the way in which, of course, they found most pleasure, he said to himself, and in the lightness of his heart had no idea of any other rule. Cara had brought in a new and very pleasant element into his life; he liked to go to her and tell her what he was doing and receive that ready sympathy which was to him something like the perfume of flowers—a thing for which it was quite unnecessary to make any return, but which was delightful to receive, and which added a something more exquisite and delicate to the very atmosphere in which this young demi-god lived, caressed by gods and men. What more could he do for Cara or anyone but communicate his own satisfaction to her, make her a sharer in the pleasure he felt in himself and his life? He was 'very fond' of Cara. He would not, for a moment, have permitted anyone to take her companionship and sympathy from him. To tell Cara, was not that the first thing that occurred to him when anything happened, any new gratification or success? As for hearing from her in return what thoughts came into her little head, what hap-

pened in her quiet life—that did not occur to Oswald. To talk of himself seemed so much more natural and so much more interesting, to Cara as well as to himself. Was it not really so? He was a man, three-and-twenty, at the very most triumphant moment of life, free to go anywhere he pleased, to do anything he liked, strong, clever, handsome, sufficiently rich. Could any circumstances be more delightful, more satisfactory? No woman, let alone a little girl, without freedom of action, could be so well off, so consciously at the 'high top-gallant' of mortal pleasantness. The sense of this suffused, so to speak, his whole being. It was not selfishness, any more than happiness is selfishness; there was even a kind of spontaneous unconscious gratitude in it for all the pleasant things in his lot.

It was with this feeling strong in his mind that he had walked along the streets the day of the accident to the little school-girl. It had been just his luck to meet with a true Perugino face. Little processions of school children are the commonest things in the world, but you might have passed a hundred of them before you came upon anything like the soft Umbrian glow of

that complexion, that tender roundness of the soft form, the devout, sweet eyes. The incident itself, it was true, was something of a break upon the general felicity; but Oswald was able to hope that the little girl whom he had carried with the utmost care and kindness to the hospital, with a sympathetic pallor on his handsome face, would turn out to be not so much hurt, or at least would mend rapidly and be none the worse. He felt very sorry for the poor little thing, yet felt there was a certain luck in the accident, for otherwise he could only have looked at the Perugino, not spoken to her as he did now. He found out the name of the house to which she belonged, and asked permission of the Sister who had been in charge of the procession to go and inquire for the little sufferer. 'Alas, I am afraid for a long time inquiries must be made at the hospital,' she said, but gave him her name. Sister Mary Jane, with natural pleasure in the kindness of so handsome a young man, and one who looked so *comme il faut*, so thoroughly a gentleman. It is just as good in an ugly and common person to be kind, but somehow nobody thinks so, and Oswald's anxiety to hear of the child's progress seemed exceptional virtue

in the mind even of the good Sister. 'Never say the upper classes are indifferent to other people's welfare,' said Sister Mary Jane. 'I don't believe a working man could have shown half so much feeling.' And young Agnes, the teacher, said nothing against this, but admired secretly and wondered why he had looked at her so, and whether by any chance they might ever meet again. Oswald, for his part, went away from the hospital with his head full of that new 'poem' which he had begun on the spot even before the *rapprochement* of the accident—

> From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung,
> Fair face!——

That was all the length he got; he discarded the other line and a half which I have already recorded, and went about all day saying over that 'fair face!' to himself. It made a suggestive break in the verse which was delightful to him, and gave him a point of pleasure the more —pleasure, and piquant suggestion of other sweetness to come.

Next day he went, as he felt it his duty to do, to the hospital to inquire for the child; and in the waiting-room he found to his wonder and

delight the Perugino herself, waiting meekly for news, but accompanied by a somewhat grim personage who would have been the lay-sister of a Roman Catholic sisterhood, but whom Oswald did not know (nor do I) how to classify in the spick and span new conventual system of Anglicanism. She kept apart with humility, but she kept her eye from under the poke-bonnet fixed upon the young lady whom she attended, so that Oswald was able to exchange only a few words with her. The little girl had her leg broken; which was very serious; but she had passed a good night and was going on well; which was more cheerful and restored the smiles to the young faces of the inquirers, to whom it was further intimated that on a certain day her friends might be admitted to see the little patient. 'Oh, thanks! I will come,' cried Agnes; and then she explained, with a blush, that poor little Emmy was an orphan and had no friends out of the 'House.' 'But everybody is fond of her there,' she added. Perhaps it was the coming in of some new feeling into his mind that made Oswald as effusive and sympathetic as his mother herself could have been. 'Then God bless the House,' he said, 'for taking such care of the

friendless.' Agnes looked at him gratefully with humid eyes.

'Then you are not one of the people who disapprove of it?' she said. 'Indeed, they do things there we could not do staying at home.'

'Ah,' said Oswald, with a smile, 'I can see you are wanted to stay at home—and I don't wonder.'

The girl shrank back a little. 'I am not a Sister,' she said, with youthful dignity. 'I am not good enough. I only teach. We must go back now.'

He stood aside, with his hat in his hand, to let them pass, and even the lay Sister, not used to courtesies, was moved by the politeness in which her humble person had a share. 'I never saw a more civil-spoken gentleman,' she said as they went towards the 'House.' Agnes in her private heart felt that he was more than a civil-spoken gentleman. How tenderly he had carried the child, and how good it was to take the trouble of going to inquire after her; and what kind enthusiasm was in his face when he bade God bless the 'House' for taking care of the friendless. Ah, that was how it ought to be thought of! The bread and butter of the

little orphans was somehow more noble than that bread and butter which had disgusted her at home when all her little brothers and sisters were squabbling for it, and mamma scolding the elder girls for letting them make such a noise, and the whole house filled with insubordination and confusion. Her work now was more satisfactory, and Louisa, who did not mind, and who scolded back again when there was scolding going on, was quite enough for all that was wanted; but still Agnes felt very glad that 'the gentleman' had set her present life before her thus anew as help to the friendless. In reality, taking the facts of the case, it was always the bread and butter, though that was noble when given to orphans and the friendless, which was but commonplace when dispensed to one's brothers and sisters. Yet life, take it how you will, in a vulgarish common Rectory, full of children, or in a 'House' devoted to the help of one's fellow-creatures, is an unheroic sort of affair at the best. There is no making up to that ideal that flies from you further and further as life goes on. Does not everything turn into commonplace as one's hands touch it, as one executes it, the great imagination gliding

ever further and further off, mocking you from the skies? So Agnes felt as she went back to the House to go on with the lessons of the little orphans, in their somewhat dingy schoolroom, all the afternoon.

As for Oswald he pursued his walk, more and more delighted with this new adventure.

> From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung,
> The gentle form disclosing to my heart,
> Of that dear image, sweet and fair and young,
> Image beloved of art;
> Which in all ages represents the dream
> Of all perfection——

Here he broke down; there was nothing fitly rhyming to 'dream' which would suit his subject, unless it was something about a 'wondrous theme,' which would be commonplace. Here accordingly he stuck, with other monosyllables rushing about hopelessly in his head, in the pleased excitement of a rhymester with a new source of inspiration. Better than staying at home! What would be better than staying at home would be to take this Perugino away to see the other Peruginos in the world, to carry her off to the loveliest places that could be thought of, to wander with her alone by riversides and in green woods and

by summer seas. Italy! that would be better than staying at home, better than the 'House' with its orphans. Such an idea as this had never crossed Oswald's mind before. He had thought that he had been in love—indeed, he was in love (was not he?) with Cara even now, and could not be content without her sympathy. But never before had he felt it necessary to think of the other, of the individual he was in love with, first before himself. Now, however, that it had come to him to do this, he did it in his characteristic way. How sweet it would be to carry her off from all these vulgar scenes, to show her everything that was beautiful, to show himself to her as the very source of felicity, the centre of everything! A teacher in a charity school, of course she was poor. He would like to make her rich, to clothe her beautifully, to give her the half of all his own delights. How sweet it would be! and how grateful she would be, and how those liquid brown eyes would look, full of eloquent thanks! He laughed at himself as he went on. Why, this was something new, another delight added to the pleasures of his life, a delight of generosity which he had never known before. To be sure it

was all in imagination, but is not imagination the better part of life?

On the visitors' day Oswald went back again to the Hospital, and found out there exactly the length of time that the visitors were allowed to stay. She would remain to the last, he felt sure, to comfort the little patient. And his plan was successful. At the last moment, when the doors were almost closing, she came running through the great hall, apologising to the porter for being so late, the ladyhood of her light figure and soft step showing very distinctly after the crowd of good, honest, anxious women, mothers or wives of the patients, who had come out before her. Agnes was by herself, for the 'House' was not far off, and her dress was a sufficient protection to her. It was not a protection, however, against Oswald, who came eagerly up with a pretence of being just too late to inquire, which delighted himself as the cleverest expedient. 'How is she?' he asked quite anxiously, and Agnes gave her report with the greatest gravity. The little girl was making quite satisfactory progress. She was very well cared for, and quite comfortable, though she had cried when her visitor left her.

'That was not so wonderful,' Agnes said seriously, 'for I was like a sight of home to her, you know.'

'I don't think it was at all wonderful,' said Oswald, with equal gravity. 'Had it been me I should have cried too.'

She looked at him suspiciously, with rising colour; but Oswald looked innocence itself. He went on quietly walking by her side as if it were the most natural thing in the world. 'Are your pupils all orphans,' he asked, 'or are others received?' with the air of a philanthropist who had troops of poor children to dispose of. This was what Agnes thought, and the 'House' was in want of funds, as where is the 'House' that is not? She answered with some eagerness:

'I think if they have lost one parent—I know we have widows' children; and they are very glad if kind people will send children to be paid for,' she said. 'But perhaps that was not what you meant?'

'I have not got any children to send; but I should like to subscribe to such an excellent institution. Charities are often so unsatisfactory,' he said in his most solemn tone, with a gravity which was sublime.

'Yes, I suppose so,' she said doubtfully. 'I do not know very much about charities, but I am sure the Sisters would be very glad; they have more to do than they have money for, I know. They are always wanting to do more.'

'I suppose I might send my offering,' said Oswald clumsily, 'to Sister Mary Jane?' Then he paused, perceiving a further advantage. 'If you will kindly show me where the convent is, I will see her at once.'

'It is close by,' said Agnes—then looked at him again, with a shade of doubt on her face. He was not like the sort of person to visit Sister Mary Jane; still if he brought subscriptions, had she any right to stop him? She went along by his side for another moment, demure and quiet. As for Oswald, between his terror of awakening her suspicions and his desire to laugh at his own dissimulation, his usual readiness quite failed him. He, too, walked by her as grave as a judge. He dared not look at her lest he should laugh, and he dared not laugh lest he should destroy his chances once and for all.

'I have seen convents abroad,' he said at last, 'but none in England. Forgive my

curiosity; are the same rules observed? Is there a Lady Superior, Abbess, or Prioress, or——, don't be angry with me if I show my ignorance.'

'I never was abroad,' said Agnes. 'There is a Sister Superior, that is all.'

'Then I suppose the Abbesses exist only in books,' he said, with an insinuating smile.

'I have not read many books.' Then she thought she was perhaps uncivil to a man who was coming with a subscription. 'Papa did not approve of light books, and I have not much time for reading now.'

'You have not been there long? Is the routine severe? Don't think I am asking from mere curiosity,' said Oswald; 'indeed I have a motive in wishing to know.'

'Oh, no, not severe; there is a great deal to do. We have to attend to all the children. If you are fond of children it is not at all hard; but what one wishes for is to be quiet sometimes,' said Agnes. 'That is not so easy when the place is so full.'

'Ah! I know a girl who has too much quiet, who would like to be in a full house and hear other people's voices.'

'Lots are very different in this world,' said Agnes, with gentle wisdom; 'one cannot tell which to choose; the only safe thing is to do one's best; to aim at something good.'

'Or to make the best of what we have,' said Oswald.

A flush of sudden colour came to her face. 'It is surely best to aim at something above us,' she said, with some confusion; 'just to be content cannot be the highest good, if what we have by nature is nothing but what others can do just as well; is not that a reason for taking the matter into one's own hands and trying something better?'

Special pleading! He could see in her eyes, in her every expression, that this was her own case which she was arguing with such warmth, and that indeed there was some doubt in her mind as to this highest idea which she had followed. And in the fervour of the self-argument she had forgotten that she did not know him, and that he had no right to be walking thus familiarly by her side.

'The worst is,' he said, 'that when we follow an ideal, the result is sometimes disappointment. Have you not found it so?'

She blushed very deeply, and cast a wondering glance up at him, astonished at his penetration. 'I did not say so,' she cried. 'I am not disappointed—only one did not think of all the details. Real things are never so beautiful as things are in your imagination, that is all.'

'Is it always so?' he said, stealing always a little further on. 'For then this world would be a sadly unsatisfactory place, and life would not be worth living.'

'Ah, everybody says so,' cried Agnes; 'that is what I always rebel against. Because one thing disappoints you, why should everything? They say the world is so bad, all full of delusion; but God made it—it cannot be so bad if we took pains enough to find out what is best.'

Oswald's heart was touched; by the eagerness in her face and the beauty of its dimples—but a little by the contrast between this young creature's abstract purpose and his own want of any purpose at all. 'I am not good enough to keep up such an argument,' he said ingenuously enough; 'I am afraid I am content to get along just as it happens from day to day. You make me blush for myself.'

When he said this an overpowering blush

covered the face which was turned towards him under the poke-bonnet. 'Oh, what have I been saying?' she cried, crimson with shame and compunction. How she had been talking to a stranger, a man, a person whose very name she did not know! What would the Sisters say, what would mamma say if she knew? Would not this heinous offence against all the proprieties prove everything they had ever said against her independent outset in the world? And he, what could he think? Agnes wished the pavement might open and swallow her up—as it had done once or twice before at very great crises of history. She could not run away from him, that would be a worse folly still, especially as the 'House' was already in sight. But she shrank away from him as far as the narrow pavement would permit, and did not dare to look at him again.

'You have said nothing but what it was good to say,' he said hurriedly. 'Do not be angry with yourself for having spoken to me. I am not unworthy of it. It will do me good, and it cannot have harmed you. I do not even know your name'—here he made a slight pause, hoping she might tell him—'mine is

Oswald Meredith. I am not much good, but if anything could make me better it would be hearing what you have said. Life is perhaps too pleasant to me—and I don't take thought enough of what is best; but I will think of you and try,' said Oswald, with a little innocent, honest, natural hypocrisy. He meant it for the moment though he did not mean it. A little glow of virtuous feeling rose in his breast. Yes, to be sure, he, too, would think of what was best in life and do it—why not? it would be good and right in itself, and agreeable to her. To be sure he would do it. The resolution was very easy and gave him quite a warm glow of virtue and goodness. He had no secret wickedness to give up, or struggles with favourite vices to look forward to. He would be good, certainly, and made up his mind to it with all the bland confidence and light-hearted certainty of a child.

And then he went across the street to the 'House' and put down his name for such a subscription as made the heart leap within the sober bosom of Sister Mary Jane.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CONFIDENCE.

'CARA, I want to tell you something,' said Oswald. 'Look here; here is a comfortable chair. Never mind your aunt; my mother will take care of her. I never have you now, not for half a minute. If I were not in love with her, I should hate your aunt—she is always there. I never can manage to say a word to you.'

This was said in Mrs. Meredith's drawing-room after dinner. Of course it is needless to say that Mrs. Meredith, apprised of Miss Cherry's arrival, had immediately done her part of neighbourly and friendly kindness by asking her to dinner at once.

'Never! She has been here two days,' said Cara.

'Two days is a very long time, especially when new thoughts are coming into one's mind,

and new resolutions. I think we are all too worldly-minded, Cara. Life is a more serious thing than you and I have been thinking. A great revolution has occurred in my thoughts.'

'Oh, Oswald! you have been hearing some great preacher; he has made you think? Who was it? I have so often heard of things like that. It must be my fault,' said Cara, piteously; 'it never has any effect upon me—but perhaps I never heard anyone good enough.'

'That is it,' said Oswald. 'It was not a preacher, but someone I met casually. I have made up my mind to be a great deal more in earnest—much more serious.'

'Oh, Oswald! I am so glad! That was all you wanted to make you very, very nice—quite what one wished.'

'So you did not think me very, very nice, Cara? I flattered myself you did like me. For my part, I never criticised you, or thought anything wanting. You were Cara—that was enough for me. I should have liked to think that simply because I was Oswald——'

'So it was! If I had not liked you because you were Oswald, should I ever have ventured to say *that* to you?' asked Cara, with a little

indignation. 'But you may be very fond of people, and yet see that something would make them still nicer. How happy your mother will be—and Edward——'

'Edward may go to Jericho!' said Oswald, with some indignation. 'What right has he to set himself up as a judge of his elder brother? I can see with the back of my head that he is watching us now, and furious because I am talking to you. You are too gentle, Cara, and have too much consideration for him. A boy like that should be kept in his place—not but that he's a very good fellow when you don't bring him forward too much. I wrote a little thing last night that I want to read to you. Shall you be alone at twelve to-morrow if I come in? Do something with Aunt Cherry; send her out shopping—all ladies from the country have shopping to do; or to her dentist, if that is what she has come to town for, poor dear old soul. But anyhow be alone, Cara, to-morrow. I want your opinion of my last poem. The subject is a face that I met by accident in the street—a complete Perugino, as if it had stepped out of a picture; though I don't know which it resembles most—one of the angels

in that great picture in the Louvre, or a Madonna somewhere else—but such colour and such sentiment! I want to read them to you, and to hear what you think.'

'Yes, Oswald; but tell me about this other thing, this change in your mind.'

'It is all the same thing; my heart is full of it. You think me mysterious; but I can't talk freely to-night with all these people so close round us. Listen, Cara,' he said, approaching his face close to hers, and speaking in a half-whisper of profoundest confidentialness—'Listen, I want your sympathy. I think I have arrived at a crisis in my life.'

This little group was watched by more than one pair of eyes, and with very varied feelings. The party consisted of Mr. Beresford, Miss Cherry, and that old friend of the Meredith family, who attended all Mrs. Meredith's receptions, Mr. Sommerville. And of all the spectators Mr. Beresford was perhaps the only one who did not cast a glance and a thought towards the two young people so distinctly isolating themselves from the rest in their corner. Mr. Sommerville looked at them with a sort of chuckle, reflecting that, as the only child of her father,

Cara was no doubt well worth the trouble ; and that, at this moment at least, the idle Oswald was not losing his time. Mrs. Meredith glanced at them with a soft pride and sympathetic pleasure in what she considered her son's happiness ; a pleasure unmarred by the thought that her other son was rendered anything but happy by this spectacle. But the two whose minds were absorbed by the scene, and who scarcely could even make a pretence of attending to anything else, were Miss Cherry and Edward Meredith. Poor Edward sat behind backs with a book in his hand, but he never turned over the leaf. All that he was capable of seeing for the moment was his brother's shoulders, which were turned to him, and which almost shut out the view of Cara, who was sitting on a little sofa fitted into a corner, separated entirely from the rest of the party by Oswald, who sat in front of her, with his back turned to the others, leaning forward to talk to her. More than the habitual suppressed sense that his brother was preferred to him in everything was the feeling in Edward's mind now. This time he was disappointed as well as wounded. Edward had been more light-hearted, more self-confident, than he had ever

been known to be in his life before, since the conversation with Cara which has been recorded in this history. He had thought then that at last he had found someone who was capable of judging between Oswald and himself, and of understanding that all the good was not on one side. When Cara had spoken of the difference between those who talked of themselves, and those whose minds were open to the troubles of others, Edward's heart had danced with sudden pleasure. She had made the unfailing comparison between them which Edward felt everybody to make, and she had not thrown herself, as most of the world did (he thought), entirely on Oswald's side. Alas, poor Edward! what was he to think now? He sat and watched with indescribable feelings while this little scene arranged itself, feeling it intolerable, yet incapable of doing anything to prevent it. Had her feelings changed, then, or had she only spoken so to please him, not meaning it; adopting the doubtful practice—very doubtful, though St. Paul seems to recommend it—of being all things to all men? Edward suffered sometimes from seeing his mother do this; must he find the same in *her* too? The thought was bitter to him. With his book

held, he did not know how, in his hands, he watched the pair. Oswald bent forward close to her, talking low, so that she only could hear, shutting out the rest of the people in the room, the rest of the world, how many soever and how important they might have been, appropriating her altogether to himself; and Cara yielded to it, and smiled, and showed no displeasure. Could this mean anything but one thing? Perhaps some passing lovers' quarrel had disturbed the equilibrium of affairs between them, when she spoke to Edward as she had done, and raised his hopes. Perhaps—— But why speculate on anything so little encouraging? It threw him down, as it were, at a plunge from those airy and lovely heights of youthful possibility, where Oswald had always preceded him, gleaning everything that was most desirable. It seemed to Edward that he had never cared for anything in his life but Cara—her 'sweet friendship,' as the young man called it, the appreciation and understanding of him which he had read in her eyes. Surely the elder brother who had all the success and all the social happiness for his portion might have spared him this. It was the rich man and the poor man over again. Oswald was welcome

to anything but Cara; and yet he had come out of his way to pluck this one flower which Edward had hoped might be for him. His heart sank as he watched them, down, down, to unimaginable depths. Oswald would not care for her as he would have done. She would but be a pleasure the more to the elder brother, whereas to Edward she would have been everything. No doubt he was talking to her now of himself, his own prowess, and what he had done or was going to do. Herself and how she was feeling would drop as things unworthy consideration; but Edward would have made them the chief, the most interesting topics—he would have forgotten himself to set her high above all others. Was this the way of the world, of which so much was written in books and sung in poetry? The book trembled in Edward's hand, and his heart suddenly swelled and filled with a sick and bitter discontent.

As for Miss Cherry, she was at the opposite point of the compass. She forgot her terrors, forgot her troubles, in pleasure at that most consoling of sights. Her gentle soul floated in a very sea of soft reflected happiness. Never to her had come that delight of youth. Dreams had been her portion all her life; perhaps dis-

appointment, perhaps only the visionary suspense of waiting for something which never came; but to see before her eyes her dearest child reaping the harvest of her own silent wishes! Was not that almost a better portion than being happy in her own person? Cherry forgot to talk, and made only a rambling reply when addressed, so much was her heart absorbed in the 'young people.' She thought that now surely Cara would tell her, and that she would take the child into her arms and cry over her, and rejoice in her. Better than happiness of her own! Her own happiness (Miss Cherry reflected), had she got it, would have been half worn out by this time—waning, perhaps faded by time. Whereas, the deferred blessedness which Cara would enjoy instead of her would be fresh as any flower, and fill all hearts with joy. She sat at the corner of the fire opposite, saying 'God bless them,' over and over, and working out in her mind all kinds of calculations about money, and how much they would begin on, and where they should live. For Miss Cherry was resolved that Cara should not be balked of her happiness. On that point she would be firm as a rock. If the young man had not very much, what did that

matter so long as they loved each other, and Cara had plenty? And Cara should have plenty, however anyone might oppose or obstruct. God bless them! All the happiness that should have been hers, and their own in addition—that was what she wished for this happy, happy, happy pair; and so sat there, taking no share in the conversation, making answers so far from the mark that lively old Mr. Sommerville set her down as a very stupid person, and even Mrs. Meredith, who was kind in her judgment of everybody, could not help thinking that Cherry had grown duller with years.

All this happened because Oswald Meredith, having arrived, as he said, at a crisis in his life, and being one of the people to whom a confidante is needful, had chosen to elect Cara, with whom up to the time of meeting his Perugino Agnes he had been half in love, to that office—so easily are people deceived—not a soul in the room could have believed it possible that the love which he was whispering in Cara's ear was love for somebody else; nor indeed, so limited were the communications which were possible with so many people close about them, had Cara herself any clear idea on the subject. That

he had something to tell her was certain, and she had almost pledged herself to get Aunt Cherry out of the way, and see him alone next day, to receive his confidence. And no fluttering of Cara's heart, no reluctance to give this promise, or excitement about the explanation, complicated the matter as far as she was concerned. The two who gave rise to all these speculations—to the misery in Edward's heart, and the joy in Miss Cherry's—were the two calmest people in the room, and the least occupied by this interview which had made them the observed of all observers. After a while, Mrs. Meredith called to Cara (with a little compunction at disturbing Oswald in his happiness; but for the moment that very evident exhibition of it had lasted long enough, the kind mother thought) and made her come out of her corner and sing. And Oswald went with her to the piano, where the lights were dim as usual, and where her sweet floating young voice rose up, not too loud nor too much in the centre of everything, the very luxury of drawing-room performances. The elder people might talk if they were so disposed without disturbing the singer, or might stop and listen when a high

pure tone floated upward like a bird into the skies, and enjoy the momentary ecstasy of it without formal attention to every bar. She sang, 'If he upbraid' and 'Bid me discourse,' those twin melodies; and those flowing fragments of the divine Ariel, which seem to breathe fragrance as well as sweetness to the ear. Miss Cherry knew the songs by heart; had she not played the accompaniments till her fingers ached, and 'practised' them over and over, till the young voice got familiar with them to that height of delicious perfection? But she sat and listened now as if she had never heard them before—asking herself was there not a sweeter, more exquisite tone, born of love and happiness, in Cara's voice. As for Edward, poor fellow, he never budged from his seat, and never put down his book—of which, however, he had not read a line. She was Oswald's now and not his. He did not know why it was that this disappointment, this desertion gave him so deep a pang; for he had not been thinking about love, nor had he any experience in it. One more had gone over to Oswald's side; but somehow the whole world on Edward's did not feel as if it could balance that one. Why should

he listen to those notes that seemed to tear his heart? He would have done all that for Cara that her song declared her ready to do—was it for Oswald?—answered her upbraiding with unresentful smiles, and thought her looks, however angry, to be like morning roses washed in dew. All that he could have done—but it was Oswald these looks were for, and not for him. Poor boy! he sat with his book before his face, paying no attention, as it seemed, but hearing and seeing everything. And at the end of every song came a little murmur of their voices as they consulted what the next was to be—the prettiest group! he stooping over her, finding her music for her—and the gleam of the candles on the piano making a spot of light about her pretty head and white dress. But Edward would not look, though he seemed to have a picture of them painted upon the blackest of backgrounds in his heart.

Miss Cherry was so led astray from the object of her special mission that she scarcely observed that her brother lingered behind them when they left, and in the flurry of finding Oswald at her side as they went down the steps of one house and up the steps of the other,

no very lengthened pilgrimage—overlooked altogether the fact that Mr. Beresford had stayed behind. Her heart was beating far more tumultuously than Cara's, which, indeed, was calm enough, as they went upstairs. The lights were out in the drawing-room, and the two went up to Miss Cherry's room, where the fire was burning cheerfully. Cara stood before the fire with her little white cloak dropping from her shoulders, and the ruddy glow warming her whiteness, the very image and type of exquisite half-childish maidenhood to the kind eyes which saw her through such soft tears.

'Oh, my darling!' said Miss Cherry, 'surely you will tell me now? I don't want to thrust myself into your confidence, Cara. I have not said a word, though I have been thinking of nothing else; but oh, my sweet! after to-night you will surely tell me now.'

Miss Cherry had moisture in her eyes. She was breathless and panting with eagerness and with the hurry of running upstairs. The colour went and came as if she had been the heroine of the romance—and indeed she looked a great deal more like the heroine of a romance than

Cara did, who turned upon her, calm but wondering, the serenity of her blue eyes.

'Tell you what, Aunt Cherry? Of course I will tell you everything that happens; but what is there to tell?'

'You don't expect me to be blind,' said Miss Cherry, almost crying in her disappointment; 'what I see with my own eyes I can't be deceived in. And do you think I am so stupid or so old, or, oh, Cara! so indifferent, as not to see everything that concerns my darling's happiness? You cannot do me such injustice as that.'

'But what is it that concerns my happiness?' said the girl, with a tranquil smile. 'Did anything happen that I don't know of? I don't know anything about it, for my part.'

Miss Cherry paused and looked at her with something like offended dignity. 'Cara, this is not like you,' she said. 'Did not I see him following you about everywhere—shutting you up in the corner to talk to you? Ah, my dear, nothing can deceive anxious eyes like mine! And there is no harm in it that you should hesitate to tell me. I should be only too happy to know, and so would Aunt Charity, that you

had escaped all the uncertainties of life by an early suitable marriage—a marriage of pure love.'

'Marriage!' Cara's face grew crimson; and the word came forth faltering in a tremor, half of shame, half of laughter. 'Aunt Cherry, what can you be thinking of? There is nothing, nothing of the kind—oh, would you believe that I could do such a thing? There! You were only laughing at me.'

'Cara, I never, never laugh on such subjects. They are far, far too important and serious. A girl's whole future might be ruined by getting frightened or laughing at the wrong time. Oh, my Cara, don't take it too lightly! If Oswald Meredith has not asked you, it is only for want of an opportunity: perhaps he thought it too public to-night, and so it was. I should not have liked him to ask you to-night,' said Miss Cherry, reassuring herself. 'It was not private enough. But he will do it the first opportunity; of that I am as sure as that I'm living. Didn't he ask you—he must have asked you—to see him to-morrow?'

'Aunt Cherry, you are mistaken. I know you are mistaken,' said Cara, growing as pale

as she had been red. The bow drawn at a venture had flown straight to the very red. 'Indeed, indeed,' she faltered, 'I assure you he doesn't mean anything of the sort.'

'He asked you to see him to-morrow?' said Miss Cherry, delighted by her success.

'He asked me, certainly, if I would be at home to-morrow; but he often does—he often comes. Aunt Cherry, do believe me. It is not that, not that at all, whatever it is.'

'My dearest,' said Miss Cherry, with great dignity, 'I know how people look when that is what is in their minds. You think I have had no experience, and so many people suppose. One does not brag of such things. But, Cara, I hope you will not allow yourself to be taken by surprise as—well, as I was. I sometimes think if I had only had someone to say to me "dear"'—Miss Cherry went on, with fresh tears coming into her mild eyes—'"you should think a great deal, and be very sure of your own feelings before you spoil a young man's life for him." A girl does that sometimes out of simple want of thought, and because she is startled. I could tell you of such a thing happening—and how I—she was sorry after, but never had it in

her power to mend it. Oh, Cara, my darling, it is a very serious thing to spoil another's life!'

'Aunt Cherry! but you are wrong. I am quite sure you are wrong,' said Cara, trembling. She could not help feeling a certain awe at the idea of this sudden power which seemed to be thrust into her hands; and yet it was too incredible to affect her profoundly. 'Oswald is not like that,' she said, 'even if he meant it. He is not so serious, he does not feel so strongly.' But then Cara herself paused, uncertain, thinking of the revolution in his thoughts of which he had told her, the crisis in his life.

'Ah, Cara, even while you are speaking to me your view changes—you see the truth of what I say. Oh, think of it, my dear, and pray to God to direct you. It is not a thing to laugh about, as so many people do. Good-night, my darling, good-night! I must not talk any more, or I shall say more than I want to say, and it ought to be all left to your own feelings. Run away, run away, my own child, and think it over and judge for yourself.'

'Cara withdrew with a little nervous shiver, drawing her cloak round her. The seriousness

of this appeal overawed the girl. That she should plunge out of her almost childhood into this serious crisis, upon which so much depended, seemed incredible. She had scarcely turned away from the door when Miss Cherry put out her head again.

'Cara, just one word. If there should be difficulties, I will stand by you. You shall not be crossed in anything that is for your happiness. We have plenty for you both. Good-night, my darling, good-night.'

This did not ease Cara's mind as Miss Cherry intended, but only bewildered her. She stood for a moment wondering, till the door was closed again and her aunt disappeared. What did she mean? Difficulties to be surmounted which could make it comforting to know that there was plenty for both had not occurred to Cara's mind, which indeed went not a step beyond the present dilemma. Could it be true? Awe, wonder, fright, contended in her mind with a suppressed sense of amusement which Cara thought wicked. Could Oswald feel so gravely, so deeply as Aunt Cherry thought? It did not seem possible; and could it be homely Cara who was the object of so serious a senti-

ment? Her little head seemed to go round and round as she tried to think. She dropped upon the hearthrug before the fire, kneeling, putting out her small hands to the warmth. Emotion is always chilly, and the effort of thinking upon such a wonderful subject made Cara shiver. She began to put things together, to remember the unusual warmth with which Mrs. Meredith embraced her, the strange look Edward gave her. When she remembered Edward's look Cara grew colder than ever, and felt disposed to cry, she could not tell why. That, then, was what they all believed, not Aunt Cherry alone, who was romantic, but everybody —and poor Edward! Cara felt a sudden pang go through her heart. Why did Edward look at her so seriously, so pitifully? Was it only sympathy for what was going to happen—was it? But Oswald? Then she felt disposed to laugh. Could Oswald have anything so serious, anything so solemn in his thoughts? To be sure he had spoken mysteriously of a revelation, a revolution. Cara did not know what to think. She was so young that the idea of anyone being 'in love' with her gave a strange thrill of half-alarmed, half-wondering excite-

ment to her being—was it possible that some one thought of a little girl like herself, as of Una, or Rosalind? A little laugh, frightened and faltering, broke from her unawares—and then she blushed crimson and was horrified with herself. Laugh! on such a subject! Her heart began to beat; her head turned round. What could she say to him, what must she do, if it was this that was in Oswald's thoughts?

CHAPTER XXII.

MYSTIFIED.

'My dear boy,' said Mrs. Meredith, 'I see what you are thinking of. You are young to settle in life, and about means there might be some difficulty; but to see you happy I would make any sacrifice. Nothing is so important as to make a good choice, which you have done, thank God. That goes beyond every prudential consideration. Nothing else matters in comparison.' And, as she said this, tears stood in her soft eyes. It was a long speech for Mrs. Meredith. Oswald had come back to the drawing-room in a loose jacket, with some lingering odour of his cigar about him, to bid his mother good-night. She was standing by the mantelpiece with her candle in her hand, while he stood close by, looking down into the fire, caressing the down, scarcely developed into a moustache, on his upper lip, and thus hiding a conscious smile.

'So you think my choice a good one, mother?' he said, with a laugh.

Mrs. Meredith did not think him serious enough for such a serious moment; but then how useless it is to go on contending with people because they will not feel as you think proper in every emergency! After all, everyone must act according to his nature; the easy man cannot be made restless, nor the light-hearted solemn. This was Mrs. Meredith's philosophy. But she gave a little sigh, as she had often done, to the frivolity of her elder son. It was late, and the fire was very low upon the hearth—one of the lamps had burned out—the room was dimmer than usual; in a corner Edward sat reading or pretending to read, rather glum, silent, and sad. Oswald, who had come in, in a very pleasant disposition, as indeed he generally was, smoothed his young moustache with great complacency. He saw at once that it was Cara of whom his mother was thinking, and it was not at all disagreeable to him that she should think so. He was quite willing to be taken for Cara's lover. There was no harm in a little mystification, and the thought on the whole pleased him.

'Ah, Oswald, I wish you were a little more

serious, especially at such a moment,' said his mother; 'there are so many things to think of. I wish you would try to realise that it is a very, very important moment in your life.'

'It is a very pleasant one, at least,' he said, smiling at her—with a smile which from the time of his baby naughtiness had always subdued his mother—and he lighted her candle, and stooped with filial grace to kiss her cheek. 'Good-night, mother, and don't trouble about me. I am very happy,' he said, with a half-laugh at his own cleverness in carrying on this delusion. Oswald thought a great deal of his own cleverness. It was a pleasant subject to him. He stood for some time after his mother was gone, looking down into the waning fire, and smiling to himself. He enjoyed the idea reflected from their minds that he was an accepted lover, a happy man betrothed and enjoying the first sweetness of love. He had not said so; he had done nothing, so far as he was aware, to originate such a notion; but it rather amused and flattered him now that they had of themselves quite gratuitously started it. As for Cara herself being displeased or annoyed by it, that did not occur to him. She was only just a girl,

not a person of dignity, and there could be no injury to her in such a report. Besides, it was not his doing; he was noway to blame. Poor dear little Cara! if it did come to that, a man was not much to be pitied who had Cara to fall back upon at the last.

Thus he stood musing, with that conscious smile on his face, now and then casting a glance at himself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. He was not thinking of his brother, who sat behind with the same book in his hands that he had been pretending to read all the evening. Edward rose when his mother was gone, and came up to the fire. He was no master of words befitting the occasion; he wanted to say something, and he did not know what to say. His elder brother, the most popular of the two —he who was always a little in advance of Edward in everything, admired and beloved and thought of as Edward had never been— how was the younger, less brilliant, less considered brother to say anything to him that bore the character of advice? And yet Edward's heart ached to do so; to tell the truth, his heart ached for more than this. It had seemed to him that Cara confided in himself, believed in his

affectionate sympathy more than she did in Oswald's; and to see Oswald in the triumphant position of avowed lover, as they all thought him to be, was gall and bitterness to the poor young fellow, in whose heart for all these years a warm recollection of Cara had been smouldering. He was the poor man whose ewe-lamb his rich brother had taken, and the pang of surprised distress in his soul was all the bitterer for that consciousness which never quite left his mind, that Oswald was always the one preferred. But Edward, though he felt this, was not of an envious nature, and was rather sad for himself than resentful of his brother's happiness. He went up to him, dragged by his tender heart much against the resistance of his will, feeling that he too must say something. He laid his hand, which quivered a little with suppressed agitation, on Oswald's shoulder.

'I don't know what to say to you, old fellow,' he said, with an attempt at an easy tone. 'I needn't wish you happiness, for you've got it——'

In spite of himself Oswald laughed. He had a schoolboy's delight in mystification, and somehow a sense of Edward's disappointment came

in, and gave him a still greater perception of the joke. Not that he wished to hurt Edward, but to most men who know nothing of love there is so much of the ridiculous involved, even in a disappointment, that the one who is heart-whole may be deliberately cruel without any evil intention. 'Oh, yes, I am happy enough,' he said, looking round at his brother, who, for his part, could not meet his eyes.

'I hope you won't mind what I am going to say to you,' said Edward. 'I am not so light-hearted a fellow as you are, and that makes me, perhaps, notice others. Oswald, look here—*she* is not so light-hearted as you are, either. She wants taking care of. She is very sensitive, and feels many things that perhaps you would not feel. Don't be vexed. I thought I would just say this once for all—and there is no good thing I don't wish you,' cried Edward, concluding abruptly, to cover the little break in his voice.

'You needn't look so glum about it, Ned,' said his brother. 'I don't mean to be turned off to-morrow. We shall have time to mingle our tears on various occasions before then. Mamma and you have a way of jumping at conclusions. As for *her*——'

'I don't like slang on such a subject,' said Edward, hotly. 'Never mind; there are some things we should never agree upon if we talked till doomsday. Good-night.'

'Good-night, old man, and I wish you a better temper—unless you'll come and have another cigar first,' said Oswald, with cheerful assurance. 'My mind is too full for sleep.'

'Your mind is full of——'

'Her, of course,' said Oswald, with a laugh; and he went downstairs whistling the air of Fortunio's song—

> Je sais mourir pour ma mie,
> Sans la nommer.

He was delighted with the mistake which mystified everybody and awakened envies, and regrets, and congratulations, which were all in their different ways tributes to his importance. And no doubt the mistake might be turned into reality at any moment should he decide that this would be desirable. He had only to ask Cara, he felt, and she would be as pleased as the others; and, indeed, under the influence of a suggestion which made him feel his own importance so delightfully, Oswald was not at all sure that this was not the best thing, and the

evident conclusion of the whole. But in the meantime he let his mind float away upon other fancies. *Her!* how little they knew who She was whom they thus ignorantly discussed. When he had got into the sanctuary of smoke, at which Mrs. Meredith shook her head, but which she had carefully prepared for her boys all the same, Oswald lit the other cigar which he had invited his brother to accompany, and sat down with that smile still upon his face, to enjoy it and his fancies. He laid his hand indolently upon a book, but his own musings were at the moment more amusing, more pleasantly exciting than any novel. The situation pleased and stimulated his fancy in every way. The demure little school procession, the meek young conventual beauty, so subdued and soft, yet with sparkles responsive to be struck out of her, half-frightened, yet at the same time elevated above all the temptations that might have assailed other girls—it was scarcely possible to realise anything more captivating to the imagination. He sat and dreamed over it all till the small hours after midnight sounded one by one, and his fire went out, and he began to feel chilly; upon which argument Oswald, still smiling to himself, went to bed, well pleased with his

fancies as with everything else belonging to him; and all the better pleased that he felt conscious of having roused a considerable deal of excitement and emotion, and of having, without any decided intention on his own part, delightfully taken in everybody, which delighted the schoolboy part of his nature. To be so clever as he was conscious of being, and a poet, and a great many other fine things, it was astonishing how much of the schoolboy was still in him. But yet he had no compunction as he went up the long staircase: he had not finished, nor indeed made the least advance with his poem.

> From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung
> Fair face!——

This beginning was what he liked best.

Edward was moved in a very different way. He would have been magnanimous and given up Cara—that is, having no real right to Cara, he might have given up the youthful imagination of her which had always been his favourite fancy, to his brother, with some wringing of the heart, but with that compensation which youth has in the sublime sense of self-sacrifice. But there is no bitterness greater in this world, either for young or old, than that of giving up

painfully to another something which that other holds with levity and treats with indifference. To hear Cara, the sacred young princess of his own fancy, spoken of lightly, and the supreme moment of possible union with her characterised as 'turning off,' was a downfall which made Edward half-frantic with pain and shame, and indignation and impatience. She would be to Oswald only a common-place little wife, to be petted when he was in the humour, standing very much lower than himself in his own good graces; whereas, to Edward she would have been——! but it was Oswald, not Edward, whom she had chosen. How strange they are! all those wonderful confusions of humanity which depress the wisest, the blind jumps at fate, the foolish choices, the passing over of the best to take the worst, which form the ordinary course of existence everywhere, the poor young fellow thought, in this first encounter with adverse events; and this was mingled with that strange wonder of the tender heart to find itself uncomprehended and rejected, while gifts much less precious than those it offers are accepted, which is one of the most poignant pangs of nature:—and

these feelings surging dimly through Edward's mind, filled him with a despondency and pain beyond words. Indeed, he could not have told all the bitterness of the vague heavy blackness which swallowed up the fair world and everything lovely before him. It was not only that Cara had (he thought) chosen Oswald instead of himself, but also that the lesser love was preferred to the greater, and that the thing one man would have worshipped was thrown to the careless keeping of another, as if it were a thing of no price. The personal question and the abstract one twisted and twined into one, as is general in the first trials of youth. He himself unconsciously became to himself the symbol of true love misjudged, of gold thrown away for pinchbeck—and Cara the symbol of that terrible perennial mistake which is always going on from chapter to chapter of the world's history. Even, for he was generous in the very pangs of that visionary envy, it added another pang of suffering to Edward's mind, that he could not but consider his brother as the pinchbeck, so far as Cara at least was considered. While Oswald sat smiling to himself through the fumes of his cigar, Edward

threw his window open and gazed out into the chill darkness of the winter night, feeling the cold wind, which made him shiver, to be more in consonance with his feelings than the warmth of the comfortable room inside.

Thus the whole little world was turned upside down by Oswald's light-hearted preference of his own gratification to anything other people might think. He had half-forgotten the appointment he had so anxiously made with Cara when the morning came, having got into full swing with his verses—which was a still more captivating way of expressing his sentiments than confession of them to Cara—

> Fair face from old Pietro's canvas sprung,
> Soft as the eve, fresh as the day,
> Sweet shadow of angelic faces, young
> And heavenly bright as they,
> Soul of all lovely things, by poets sung—

He could not content himself with the last line —'Accept my lay,' or 'my humble lay,' was the easiest termination, but it was prosaic and affected. The consideration of this occupied him to the entire exclusion of Cara, and he only recollected with what anxiety he had begged her to get rid of her aunt and see him

alone at a quarter past twelve, having appointed to meet her at noon. He thrust the bit of paper on which he had been scribbling into his pocket, when he remembered, and went off languidly to pay his visit; he had meant to have completed the poem, and read it over to her, but it was clear that this must be postponed to another day.

Meanwhile good Miss Cherry, full of anxieties, had got up much earlier than was necessary, and had spent a long day before twelve o'clock. By way of giving to her withdrawal at that fated hour an air of perfect naturalness and spontaneity, she invented a great many little household occupations, going here and there over the different rooms with Nurse, looking over Cara's things to see what was wanted, and making a great many notes of household necessities. The one most serious occupation which she had in her mind she postponed until the moment when the lover, or supposed lover, should appear. This was her real object in coming to London, the interview which she had determined to have with her brother. With a heart beating more loudly than it had beaten for years, she waited till Oswald Meredith's appear-

ance gave the signal for this assault, which it was her duty to make, but which she attempted with so much trembling. By the time Oswald did appear her breath had almost forsaken her with agitation and excitement, and she had become almost too much absorbed in her own enterprise to wonder that at such a moment the young man should be late. She was already in the library when Oswald went upstairs. Two interviews so solemn going on together! the comfort of both father and daughter hanging in the balance. Miss Cherry knocked so softly as to be unheard, and had to repeat the summons before that 'Come in' sounded through the closed door, which was to her as the trump of doom.

She went in. Mr. Beresford was seated as usual at his writing-table, with all his books about him. He was busy, according to his gentle idea of being busy, and looked up with some surprise at his sister when she entered. Miss Cherry came noiselessly forward in her grey gown, with her soft steps. He held his pen suspended in his fingers, thinking perhaps it was some passing question which she meant to ask, then laid it down with the slightest

shadow of impatience, covered immediately by a pretended readiness to know what she wanted, and a slight sigh over his wasted time. Those who have their bread to work for take interruptions far more easily than those whose labours are of importance to nobody, and Macaulay writing his History would not have breathed half so deep a sigh as did James Beresford over the half-hour he was about to lose.

'You want something?' he said, with the smile of a conscious martyr.

'Only to speak to you, James,' said Miss Cherry, breathless. Then she looked up at him with a deprecating, wistful smile. 'It is not very often that we meet now, or have any opportunity for a little talk,' she said.

'Yes, Cherry, that is true enough. I have been so much away.'

'And people drift apart; that is true too. I know I can't follow you in all your deep studies, James; but my heart is always the same. I think of you more than of anyone, and of Cara. I hope she will live to be the dearest comfort to you as she always was to us. The light went away from the Hill, I think, when she went away.'

'You have been very good to her, I am sure,' he said, with due gratefulness, 'and most kind. You have brought her up very wisely, Cherry. I have no fault to find with her. She is a good little girl.'

Miss Cherry, to hear her small goddess thus described, felt a sudden shock and thrill of horror; but she subdued herself. 'I wanted to speak to you James,' she said, 'of that:' then, with a slight pant and heave of her frightened bosom—'oh, James! do you not think you could give her a little more of your society—learn to know her better? You would find it worth your while!'

'Know her better! My dear Cherry, I know her very well, poor child. She is a good little girl, always obedient and dutiful. There cannot be very much fellowship between a man of my occupations and a quiet simple girl such as Cara is, I am glad to say; but I am very fond of her. You must not think I don't appreciate my child.'

'It is not quite that,' said poor Cherry. 'Oh, James, if you only knew it, our Cara is a great deal more than merely a good little girl. I would not for a moment think of finding fault

with you ; but if you would see her a little more in the evening—if you would not go out quite so much——'

'Go out!—I really go out very seldom. I think you are making a mistake, Cherry, my dear.'

"Oh, no, James ; since I have come it has been my great thought. I know you don't mean to be unkind ; but when you are out every evening——'

'Really, Cherry, I had no idea that my liberty was to be infringed, and my habits criticised.'

Miss Cherry came up to him with an anxious face and wet eyes. 'Oh, James, don't be angry! That is not what I mean. It is not to criticise you. But if you would stay with your child in the evening sometimes. She is so sweet and young. It would give you pleasure if you were to try—and—it would be better, far better in other ways too.'

'I don't understand what you mean,' he said, hurriedly.

'No, no. I was sure, quite sure, you never thought, nor meant anything. But the world is a strange world. It is always misconceiving

innocent people—and, James, I am certain, nay, I *know*, it would be so much better: for every one—in every way.'

'You seem to have made up your mind to be mysterious, Cherry,' he said. 'I don't see to whom it can be of importance how I pass my time. To Cara you think? I don't suppose she cares so much for my society. You are an old-fashioned woman, my poor Cherry and think as you were brought up to think. But, my dear, it is not necessary to salvation that a man should be always in his own house, and between a man of fifty and a girl of seventeen there is not really so much in common.'

'When they are father and daughter, James——'

'That does not make very much difference that I can see. But if you think Cara is dull, we must hit upon something better than my society. Young friends, perhaps—if there is any other girl she likes particularly, let her invite her friend by all means. I don't want my little girl to be dull.'

'It is not that, James. She never complains; but, oh, if you would try to make friends with the child! She would interest you, she would

be a pleasant companion. She would make you like your home again: and, oh! pardon me, James, would not that be better than finding your happiness elsewhere?'

At this moment the door was opened, and John appeared ushering in a scientific visitor, whose very name was enough to frighten any humble person like Miss Cherry. She withdrew precipitately, not sorry to be saved from further discussion, and wondering at herself how she could have had the audacity to speak so to James. Nothing but her anxiety could have given her such boldness. It was presumption, she felt, even in her secret soul, to criticise, as he said, a man like her brother, older and so much wiser than herself; but sometimes a little point of custom or regard to appearances might be overlooked by a clever man in the very greatness of his thoughts. This was how kind Miss Cherry put it—and in that way the mouse might help the lion, and the elderly, old-fashioned sister be of use to a wise and learned man, though he was a member of all the societies. And how kindly he had listened to her, and received her bold animadversions! When there is anything to admire in the behaviour of those they look

up to, kind women, like Miss Cherry, can always find some humble plea like this at least, for a little adoration. Such a clever man, had he not a right to be furious, brutal if he pleased, when a simple little woman dared to find fault with him? But, on the contrary, how well he took it—what a man he was!

Miss Cherry, hurrying upstairs, met Cara coming down, and her other excitement came back to her in a moment. She took the girl's hands in hers, though it was in no more retired place than the landing on the stairs. 'Well, my darling,' she said, anxiously.

'Well, Aunt Cherry!' said Cara, and laughed. 'I was coming to look for you, to ask you to come out and get some ribbon——'

'But Cara——'

'Come!' cried the girl, running upstairs again to get her hat; and what had really happened that morning Miss Cherry never knew. So that both her excitements came to nothing, and the day turned out uneventful like other common days.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A REMONSTRANCE.

Mr. Beresford was seated in his library, as usual, in the morning; he had breakfasted and glanced over his newspaper, and now had settled down to 'work,' that is, to what he called work. He would not have been much the worse had he idled, nor would his finances or anybody's comfort have suffered; probably that was one reason why he was so industrious. His writing-table was arranged with the most perfect order: here his blotting-book, his pens, his paper of all sizes, from ponderous foolscap to the lightest accidental note; there his books of reference; in the centre, the volume he was studying. John, by long practice, had learned to know exactly where to place all his master's paraphernalia. He sat in front of the fire, which crackled merrily and made light *pétillements*, in the sound of which alone there was genial company. The

ruddy sunshine of the winter morning entered in a sidelong gleam ; everything was comfortable, warm, and luxurious round him ; the room was lined almost as high as the ceiling with books, and the square table near the further window was covered with magazines and newspapers. He spared nothing in that way, though for himself he did not read half the literature that was placed there ready for him. He took his place at his table, opened his book, put down the letters which he had brought with him from the breakfast-table, and prepared to write—or rather to work—for his object was to write a review of the serious book he was reading ; his letters were about this and other important matters—a meeting of the Imperial Society—the arrangements to be made for a series of lectures —the choice of a new member. He put down all these momentous epistles on his table, and turned over a page of the book in respect to which he was prepared to give to the world some new ideas of his own on the relations between mind and matter, or rather, upon some of those strange processes by which the human brain, which is as purely matter as the human leg, pranks itself up in the appearance of a spiritual

entity. He was fond of philosophical questions. But when he had made all these preparations he stopped suddenly short and began to think. What process was it that brought across him, like a sudden breath of summer air with the scent of flowers in it, that sudden flood of recollections? In a moment, invading his breast and his mind with thoughts of the past, he felt as people do to whom an old friend appears suddenly, bringing with him a hundred forgotten associations. Had some one come into the warm and pleasant room and laid a hand upon his shoulder and looked him in the face? If James Beresford had been a superstitious man he would have thought so. His wife had been dead for more than five years—and long and weary and painful these years had been. Lately, however, his heart had been lulled to rest by sweet friendliness and sympathy and help; he had felt strong enough to take up his ordinary life again and return into the world—not unfaithful, but consoled and soothed. Nothing had happened to him to break this sensation of rest from trouble, and what happened now was not painful. It was only the sudden return of thoughts which had been in abeyance. She

seemed to come and stand by him, as she used to do, looking over his shoulder, asking after his work. 'What are you doing?' he seemed to hear her say—leaning over him with that familiar proprietorship of him and all his works and ways which was so sweet. Why had this visitation come to him to-day? Of course it must have been some impression on his nerves which thus reflected itself through his being. Some chance contact had stirred one of those strings which move what we call feelings in the strange machinery of our puppet nature. He thought somehow that when he had said this it explained the mystery. All at once, like a gale of spring, like a sudden thaw—or like some one coming into the room; though the last metaphor was not so fine as the others, it was the most true. Few of our mental processes (he would have allowed) are pure thought—this was not thought at all; he felt as if she stood by him—she whom he had lost: as if their life came back as it used to be. His grief for her, he knew, had been lulled to rest, and it was not any revival of the sharpness and bitterness of that grief which moved him: it was a return for a few minutes of the life they had lived together, of the conditions which life had borne before.

Perhaps it was simply because his sister was there, and the sound of the two feminine voices, hers and Cara's, at the breakfast-table, had brought back memories of the old times. He leant his elbows on his open book and his chin in the hollow of his hands. What a different life it had been! What were his societies now, his articles, all his 'work,' to the first spontaneous living of those days that were dead? How she would come in familiar, sure of her right to be wherever he was—not timid, like Cara, who never knew whether her father would be pleased or not pleased to see her, nor reverential, like good Cherry, who admired and wondered at his books and his writing. He knew how these two would look at any moment if need or business brought them knocking to his door. But he never could tell how *she* would look, so various were her aspects, never the same—two women sometimes in one moment, turning to tears or to sunshine in the twinkling of an eye, cheering him, provoking him, stimulating him. Ah, what a change! life might have its soothings now, its consolations, little makings up and props, to give it the appearance of being the same life as before, but no-

thing could ever make it what it had been. He had not died of it, neither would he die of it—the grief that kills is rare; but whatever might happen to him in the world, so much was certain, that the delight of life was over, the glory gone out of it. And he did not wish it to be otherwise, he said to himself. There are things which a man can have but once. Some men are so happy as to retain those best things of life till old age—but he was not one of those blessed men——. And he was no longer wretched and a wanderer on the face of the earth. Time had brought him a softening quiet, a dim pleasantness of tranquillity and friends—good, tender, soothing, kindest friends.

Some one coming in broke suddenly this strange revival of memory—and of all people in the world it was the doctor, Maxwell, whose name was so linked to the recollections of the old life, but who, Beresford felt, had never been the same to him since Annie died. His mind had been so preoccupied that he had never inquired what was the cause of this estrangement. What did it matter to him if all the world was estranged? He had felt vaguely; and if he thought upon the subject at all, sup-

posed that in the anguish of his mind he had said something or done something to vex his old friend. But what did it matter? His life had been too much shipwrecked at first to leave his mind at liberty to care what might happen. And now the estrangement was a *fait accompli*. But his heart was touched and soft that morning. The thought of Annie had come back to him, and here was some one deeply associated with Annie. In the little start with which he got up from his chair at the sound of Maxwell's name, a rush of resolution ran through his veins with a rapidity such as leaves words hopelessly behind. 'I will get to the bottom of it whatever it is. I will know the cause, and make it up with Maxwell.' These words would have taken some definite atom of time to think and say, but the thought rushed through his mind instantaneously as he rose holding out his hand. 'Maxwell! you are an unusual visitor now-a-days. I am very glad to see you,' he said. That he should have come just now of all times in the world!

'Yes; I have ceased to be about the house as I used to be,' the doctor said, with a slight confusion, grasping the hand offered to him.

And then they sat down on two chairs opposite to each other, and there was a pause. They were both embarrassed a little. This kind of coolness between two friends is more difficult to get over than an actual quarrel. Maxwell was not at his ease. How many recollections this room brought back to him! That strange visitor who had stood by James Beresford's side a minute before stood by his now. He seemed to see her standing against the light, shaking her finger at them in reproof. How often she had done so, the light catching her dress, making a kind of halo round her! Was it possible she was gone—gone, disappeared from before their eyes, making no sign? And yet how clearly she seemed to stand there, looking at the two whose talk she had so often interrupted, broken off, made an end of, with capricious sweet impertinences. Maxwell, like her husband, felt the reality of her so strong that his mind rejected with a strange vertigo the idea of her absolute severance from this house and this life. The vertigo grew still greater, and his head seemed to turn round and round when he remembered why he had come.

'Why is it?' said Beresford. 'Something

seems to have come between us—I can't tell what. Is it accidental, or does it mean anything? I have had a distracted life, as you know, and I may have done something amiss——'

'No, no,' said the other, hurriedly; 'let us say nothing about that. I meant nothing. Beresford, if you have this feeling now, what will you think when you hear that I have undertaken a disagreeable, intrusive mission?'

'Intrusive?' He smiled. 'I don't see what you could be intrusive about. You used to know all my affairs—and if you don't know them now, it is not my fault.'

'Good heavens!' cried the doctor, involuntarily, 'how am I to do it? Look here, Beresford; I said I would come, thinking that I, who knew you so well, would annoy you less than a stranger—but I don't feel so sure about that now.'

'What is this gunpowder plot?' said Beresford, with a laugh. 'Have I been guilty of high treason without knowing it, and must I fly for my life?'

The doctor cleared his throat; he grew red in the face; finally he jumped up from his

chair and went to the big fireplace, where he stood with his back to the fire, and his face a little out of his friend's sight.

'Beresford, have you ever thought what a strange position Mrs. Meredith is in?'

'Mrs. Meredith!' He said this with such unfeigned surprise that his visitor felt more awkward than ever. 'What can she have to do with any disunion between you and me?'

'By Jove!' cried the doctor, 'we are all a pack of fools;' and from the fire he walked to the window in the perturbation of his thoughts.

Beresford laughed. 'One can never say anything civil to a speech like that—especially as, forgive me! I have not a notion what you are being fools about.'

Maxwell looked out into the square to pluck up courage. He coughed as men do when they are utterly at a loss—when it is worth while to gain even a moment. 'Don't be angry with me,' he said, with sudden humility. 'I should not have taken it in hand, especially as you have that feeling—but—look here, I *have* taken it in hand, and I must speak. Beresford, old Sommerville came to me yesterday. He's Meredith's friend, with a general commission to look after the family.'

'Has anything happened to Meredith?' said Mr. Beresford, with concern. 'This is the second time you have mentioned them. I scarcely know him—but if there is anything wrong, I shall be very sorry for *her* sake.'

'There is nothing wrong, unless it is of your doing,' said the doctor, with abrupt determination. 'To tell the truth, Meredith has heard, or somebody has told him, or a gossiping has been got up—I don't know what—about your visits. You go there too often, they say—every night——'

'Maxwell!' cried James Beresford, springing to his feet.

'There! I told you,' said the doctor. 'I said you would be angry—as if it were my fault. I am only the mouthpiece. Old Sommerville would have come to you himself—but I was sure it could be nothing but inadvertence, and undertook the office, knowing you too well—much too well—to think for a moment——'

'Inadvertence! Knowing me too well to think! In the name of heaven, what is there to think? What have I been inadvertent aboaut? Angry! Of course I am angry.

What have I done to be gossiped about? One of us must be out of his senses surely, either you or I——'

'No, it isn't that. Gossip does not spare anyone. And, pardon me,' said the doctor, growing bolder now that the worst was over, 'if you had ever thought on the subject, you must have seen that such frequent visits—to a woman who is married, whose husband is at the other end of the world——'

'Stop—stop, I tell you! I will not have *her* discussed or her name introduced.'

'That is quite right, Beresford. I knew you would feel so. Is it right then that the tenderest heart on the face of the earth should be worried and bullied because of you?'

'Good God!' cried the bewildered man, 'has she been worried and bullied? What do you mean? Who has presumed to find fault? She is—— I am not going to say what she is.'

'It is not necessary. I know that as well as anyone.'

'Beresford made a half-conscious pause, and looked at his reprover with a sudden involuntary raising of his eyebrows. Knew that as well as anyone! Did he? Vain boaster!

Who but himself knew all the consoling sweetness, all the soft wealth of sympathy in this friend of friends? He felt more angry with Maxwell for this false pretension than for all his other sins. 'I am at a loss to know,' he said, coldly, 'by what right anyone attempts to interfere with my liberty of action. I am not a man whose visits to any house can be considered suspicious. I should have thought that my character and my antecedents were enough to preserve me from injurious comment and the gossip you speak of.'

'Beresford,' said the other, hastily, 'who thinks of you? No amount of gossip could do you any real harm. You must see that. The question is about *her*.'

It was Beresford's turn now to be excited. He began to pace about the room in deep annoyance and agitation. Of course this was true. What was nothing to a man might be everything to a woman; and no man worthy the name would expose a woman to comment. He took refuge, first, in furious abuse of gossip. What had anyone to do with his proceedings? A man is always more shocked and angry to find himself the object of remark than a

woman is. It seemed incredible to him that *he*, of all people in the world, *he* should be the object of impertinent remark. The idea was intolerable to Beresford. The doctor wisely said nothing, but let him have his ravings out, withdrawing himself to a chair by the table, where he sat writing out imaginary prescriptions with the worn stump of a pen which he found there, and keeping as far out of the passionate stream of monologue as possible. This was wise treatment, the best he could have adopted, and after a while the subject of the operation calmed down. He flung himself at last into his chair, and there was a stormy pause.

'I suppose,' said Beresford, with a long-drawn breath of mingled pain and anger, 'this was what Cherry meant. I could not make her out. She is in it too. Have you all laid your heads together and consulted what was the thing that would pain me most—the most susceptible point left?'

Maxwell made no direct reply. 'If Miss Cherry has spoken to you, Beresford, you know your sister,' he said. 'She would not hurt a fly—much less you, whom she holds in such

high respect; and she would not think evil readily—would she, now? If she has spoken, you must understand that there is something in it. Listen, my dear fellow. There are things that must be done and left undone in this world for the sake of the fools in it merely. You know that as well as I do. Say the fools ought to be defied and crushed if you like, but in reality we have all to consider them. The people of bad imaginations and low minds and mean views really make the laws for the rest of the world. We can't help it. For ourselves it might not matter; but for those who are dear to us—for those who are less independent than we——'

Again there was a pause. Beresford sat with his elbows on the table and bit his nails savagely. In this painful amusement there seemed a certain relief. He stared straight before him, seeing nothing. At last he turned round sharply upon the doctor, who, with his head bent down, still sat scribbling without any ink with the old stump of the pen in his hand. 'What do you want me to do?' he said.

'Beresford, I did not come here to dictate to you. I came simply to call your attention——'

'Oh, let us not quibble about words! Dictation! yes, and something more than dictation. Of course I am helpless before the plea you bring up. Of course I have nothing to do but submit, if there is any question of annoyance to—— Low minds and bad imaginations indeed! That anyone should suggest the most distant possibility, the shadow of a reproach!'

'We suggest nothing of the sort, Beresford. We suggest only a most simple precaution—a rule ordinarily observed.'

He made a gesture of impatience, stopping further explanation, and again for two minutes, which looked like an hour, the two men sat silent together, not, it may be supposed, with any increase of friendliness towards each other in their thoughts. Perhaps, however, it was only on the side of the reproved that this feeling was really strong. The reprover was compunctious and eager to do anything he could to conciliate. He kept a furtive watch upon his victim as he scribbled. Beresford had retreated within that most invulnerable of all fortresses—silence, and sat, still biting his nails, staring into the vacant air, neither by word nor look making any communication of his thoughts. Nothing is more

difficult than to maintain a silence like this; the least absorbed of the two engaged in the passage of arms comes to feel after a time that he must speak or die—and what to say? More upon the same subject might lessen the impression already made, and to introduce another subject would be impossible. When the pause had lasted as long as possibility permitted, Maxwell got up, put the pen slowly back in the tray from which it had strayed, tossed the piece of paper he had been scribbling upon into the waste-basket, gathered up his gloves, his stick, his hat. Nothing could be more slow and hesitating than all these preparations for departure, which were somewhat ostentatious at the same time, by way of calling the attention of Beresford, and perhaps drawing forth something more. 'I must be going,' he said at last, holding out his hand. 'I hope you won't think me —unfriendly,' Beresford, in anything I have said.'

'Good morning,' said the other, sullenly; then he made a visible effort to command himself and rose up, but slowly, putting out his hand. 'Very likely not,' he said. 'I don't say it was unfriendly. You would not have

taken such a disagreeable office on yourself if you had meant unkindness. No; I suppose I should thank you, but it is rather hard to do it. Good-bye.'

There was no more said. Maxwell went away, not feeling very victorious or proud of himself. Was not he a fool to have undertaken it in order to prevent scandal, he said to himself, in order to save a woman from annoyance, in order to help James Beresford out of trouble —a man whom he had liked, and from whom he had been estranged? What business had he to meddle with other people's business? This, I fear, was his reflection, as it has been the reflection of so many who have strained a point to aid a friend, and whose self-denial has not been appreciated. 'Catch me doing such a foolish thing again,' he said to himself.

As for Beresford, he resumed his seat and his thoughts when the other was gone. Those thoughts were hot within him, and full of pain. He who, even when this messenger of evil arrived, had been thinking with faithful love of his wife; he whose life had been made a desert by her dying, whose whole existence was changed, who had not cared for years what be-

came of him, because of that loss—to be met by this unjust and insane reproval as soon as he had screwed his courage to the sticking-place, and resumed his natural position in his own house. It had been a hard thing to do; at every corner he had expected to meet her—in the silence he had fancied he heard her calling him—the whole house was full of her, echoing with her steps and her voice. Yet he had schooled himself to come back, to resume so much as remained to him of life under his own roof—so much as remained, not thinking of years, but of value and merit. He was not of very much use to anyone, nor had he been much missed, perhaps, except in the working of the societies, and there were so many people who could do that. But he had been patient and come back, and established himself 'at home,' because it was his duty. He had not shrunk from his duty. And this was his reward. His one source of soft consolation—the one gentle friend on whose constant sympathy he could reckon—who made this life of endurance supportable to him, and kept him up by kind words, by understanding his wants and troubles—she was to be taken from him. He

got up, and walked up and down his room, and then went to the window and looked blankly out. Almost without knowing what it was, he saw a brougham come to the next door, and old Mr. Sommerville step out of it, and enter Mrs. Meredith's house. He had gone to warn her, to disturb the sweet composure of her mind, to embitter all her thoughts. Beresford turned round, and began to walk up and down more and more hotly. Could anything in the world be more innocent? He asked, nay, he wanted, nothing more of her. To go and sit by her now and then (this was how he characterized his long and daily visits), what was there in that to justify this insulting demand upon him? He lashed himself up into a fury when he thought of it. He, the truest of mourners, and she, the least frivolous of women. If ever there was a true friendship, full of support and mutual comfort, this was the one. And now, at the pleasure of a set of wretched gossips, ill-minded men, disagreeable women, was this gentle makeshift and substitute for domestic happiness to be torn from him? And how—good heavens, how?

That was the question. It was easy to talk,

and say that such a thing must cease; but how was it to be done? Was he supposed capable of telling her that he must resign her friendship? Was Sommerville, perhaps, making the communication at this very moment—telling her that it must not be; suggesting thoughts that would distress her mind, and disturb the whole tenor of her life? For to give pain would be worse than misfortune to her, and she could not so cast him off without giving pain and feeling it. He thought—it was an imagination—that he heard voices high in discussion on the other side of the wall that separated the two houses. Was that old meddler taking it upon him to lecture *her* now?

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL.

Old Mr. Sommerville got out of his little brougham at Mrs. Meredith's door. He was a wealthy old man, of whom nobody knew very much, except that he had made his money in India, and that he lived in cosy bachelor chambers, with everything extremely comfortable about him, and knew everybody, and was fond of good things, the pleasures of the table, as old-fashioned people said, and indeed all other pleasures within the reach of a respectable old person of sixty-five. He kept a neat little brougham, and occasionally mounted a strong, steady cob, with a coat like satin, looking much better fed than his master did, who was always a meagre old gentleman, notwithstanding his good living. Mr. Sommerville was the confidential friend of the absent Mr. Meredith, whom nobody, not even his own children, knew. As

he had advanced in prosperity, it was through old Sommerville's hands that his family were allowed to share the advantage of his increasing income, and the boys had learned to know that it was he who reported concerning them to their father, and received communications from their tutors. The unknown Mr. Meredith did nothing to discredit his wife; but he kept this constant check over her. It had often been galling enough to her; but she was a sweet-tempered woman, used to accepting the evil with the good, and she had wisely put up with the curb. She disarmed Mr. Sommerville by her gentleness and sweetness, by throwing her house open to him, and inviting the scrutiny which she might have defied, had she been of a different disposition. Sommerville had not been unworthy of the confidence placed in him. He had kept up a certain appearance of investigation. All their lives long the boys had been accustomed to connect his appearance with a lecture of more than usual seriousness from their mother; but she had the good sense never to say anything to connect the old man's name with the reprimand or warning. All that she said was, 'Your father will not like to hear that you are idle,

disobedient, unruly,' as the case might be ; therefore, it was not from her they learned that Sommerville meant special scrutiny and fault-finding. But since they had been grown up, Oswald and Edward had themselves supplied the thread of connection. Even this, however, had not made them dislike their old friend. At one moment of especial wickedness Oswald, indeed, had designated their father's deputy as the Spy ; but this was simply a spark of malicious boyhood, struck out in a moment of resentment, and did not permanently affect their minds, though the title lasted. The Spy was, on the whole, friendly and indulgent—sometimes even he got them out of small scrapes, and it was he who persuaded the mother that furtive cigars and other precocious masculinities were not criminal. So that altogether, notwithstanding his ominous name, he was not unpopular in the house. It was but lately that he had taken to coming to those almost daily receptions, which was so principal a feature in Mrs. Meredith's existence. There he would sit and watch her proceedings, her sympathetic talks, the audiences she gave, and all the little acts of adoration performed before her, with not unkindly eyes. She was a kind

of gentle impostor, a natural humbug, to old Sommerville; but he laughed softly to himself as he thus characterized her, and did not like her less. Never, during all these years, amid all this popularity, had she given him occasion for a word of serious warning. Amid all the admiration and semi-worship she had received, the kind but watchful Spy had found no harm in her; but now, at last, here was something which called for his interference. To see him arrive at that hour in the morning was alarming in itself to Mrs. Meredith. She met him with her usual kind smile, but with an earnest look of inquiry.

'Is anything the matter?' she said.

'Send the boy away,' said Mr. Sommerville, in an undertone.

It was Edward who was in the room, and his mother found a commission for him with tremulous haste; for the distant Meredith was not always reasonable in his requirements, and of late had written impatiently about the coming out of one of his sons—a calamity which their mother with all her might was endeavouring to stave off and postpone. She thought her

husband's friend must bring still more urgent orders, and her heart began to beat.

'I wish you would go and tell Cara that I hope she will come to the Sympsons with me this afternoon, Edward,' she said.

And Edward, full of the thought of his brother's happiness, and loth yet eager to see if Cara was happy in this new development of affairs, obeyed reluctantly, but still with a secret alacrity. She was left alone with the mentor, who had so often brought her advice or semi-reproof.

'You have something to tell me? Oh, Mr. Sommerville, what is it?' she cried.

'It is nothing very bad. You must not be alarmed—there is no ill news,' he said.

The anxious mother looked at him with a wistful entreaty in her eyes. Ill news was not what she feared. When a woman has had neither companionship nor help from her husband for a dozen years or so, naturally her sensitiveness of anxiety about him gets modified, and it is to be feared that she would have taken information of Mr. Meredith's serious illness, for instance, more easily than the summons which she feared for one of her boys. She watched

every movement of her visitor's face with anxious interest.

'Edward cannot go till the settled time. You know that,' she said, instinctively following the leading of her own thoughts.

'It is not Edward that I have come to speak of; it is neither of the boys.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Meredith, with a sigh of involuntary relief; and she turned to him with cheerful ease and interest, delivered from her chief fear. This evident ignorance of any other cause for animadversion moved the old Spy in spite of himself.

'What I am going to say to you, my dear lady, is not exactly from Meredith—though he has heard of the subject, and wishes me to say something. I hope you will believe there is no harm meant, and that what I do, I do from the best feeling.'

'I have never doubted your kind feeling, Mr. Sommerville; but you half frighten me,' she said, with a smile. 'If it is not the boys, what can there be to be so grave about? Tell me quickly, please.'

Mr. Sommerville cleared his throat. He put his hat upon the head of his cane, and twirled

it about. It did not often happen to the old Scotch nabob to be embarrassed; but he was so now.

'You'll understand, my dear lady, that in what I say I'm solely actuated by the thought of your good.'

'How you alarm me!' said Mrs. Meredith. 'It is something, then, very disagreeable?'

'Oh, yes. I've no doubt it will be disagreeable. Medicines are seldom sweet to the palate. Mrs. Meredith, I will out with it at once, not to keep you in suspense.'

Here, however, he paused to take out his handkerchief, and blew his nose with a very resounding utterance. After he had finished this operation he resumed:

'I don't presume to teach a lady of your sense what is her duty; and I don't need to tell you that the world exercises a great supervision over women who, from whatever cause, are left alone.'

'What have I done?' cried Mrs. Meredith, half frightened, half laughing. 'I must have made some mistake, or you would not speak so.'

'I doubt if it could be called a mistake; perhaps it would be better to say a misappre-

hension. Mrs. Meredith, there is one of your friends who pays you a visit every day.'

'Several,' she said, relieved. 'You know how kind people are to me. Instead of supervision, as you say, I get a great deal of sympathy——'

Mr. Sommerville waved his hand, as if to ward off her explanation. 'I am speaking of one person,' he said: 'a man—who is here every evening of his life, or I'm mistaken—your neighbour, Mr. Beresford, next door.'

'Mr. Beresford!' she said, with a thrill of disagreeable surprise; and there came to her instantaneously one of those sudden realisations of things that might be thought or said, such as sometimes overwhelm the unsuspecting soul at the most inappropriate moment; her colour rose in spite of herself.

'Just Mr. Beresford. He means no harm and you mean no harm; but he should be put a stop to, my dear lady. You gave me your word you would not be angry. But, madam, you're a married lady, and your husband is at a distance. It's not for your credit or his good that he should visit you every night.'

'Mr. Sommerville! stop, please! I cannot let you talk so—or anyone.'

'But you must, my dear lady, unless you want everybody to talk, and in a very different spirit. The world is a wicked world, and takes many things into its head. You're a very attractive woman still, though you're no longer in your first youth——'

'Mr. Sommerville, what you say is very disagreeable to me,' said Mrs. Meredith, offended. 'Poor Mr. Beresford! since he lost his wife he has been miserable. Nobody ever mourned more truly; and now, when he is trying to learn a little resignation, a little patience——'

'He should not learn those virtues, madam, at your expense.'

'At my expense!' she said, with sparkling eyes; 'at what expense to me? I allow him to come and sit with me when he has no one at home to bear him company. I allow him——'

'I thought his daughter had come to keep him company.'

'Poor Cara! she is a sweet child; but, at seventeen, what can she know of his troubles?'

'Softly, softly,' said Mr. Sommerville; 'one plea is enough at a time. If Mr. Beresford is without a companion, it does not matter that his daughter is only seventeen; and whatever

her age may be, if she is there he cannot be without companionship. My dear lady, be reasonable. If he has a child grown up, or nearly so, he should stay at home. A great many of us have not even that inducement,' said the old man, who was an old bachelor; 'but no kind lady opens her doors to us.' He looked at her sharply with his keen eyes; and she felt, with intense annoyance, that she was getting agitated and excited in spite of herself.

'Mr. Sommerville,' she said, with some dignity, 'if anyone has been misrepresenting my friendship for Mr. Beresford, I cannot help that. It is wicked as well as unkind; for I think I have been of use to him. I think I have helped him to see that he cannot abandon his life. I don't mean to defend myself. I have not done anything to be found fault with; friendship——'

'Is a delusion,' said the old man. 'Friendship between a man and a woman! There is no sense in it. I don't believe a word of it. Meaning no harm to you, my dear lady. You don't mean any harm; but if you talk to me of friendship!'

'Then I had better say nothing,' she an-

swered quickly. 'My husband's representative —if you call yourself so—has no right to treat me with rudeness. I have nothing more to say.'

'My dear lady,' said old Mr. Sommerville, 'if I have appeared rude I am unpardonable. But you'll forgive me? I mean nothing but your good. And all I want is a little prudence —the ordinary precautions.'

'I will none of them!' she said, with a flush of indignation. 'I have nothing to be afraid of, and I will not pretend to be prudent as you call it. Let the world think or say what it pleases—it is nothing to me.'

Then there was a pause, and Mrs. Meredith betook herself to her work—a woman's safety-valve, and laboured as if for a wager, while the old plenipotentiary sat opposite to her, confounded and abashed, as she thought. But Mr. Sommerville was too old and experienced to be much abashed by anything. He sat silent, collecting his forces for a renewed attack. That was all. He had a sincere friendship for her in his way, and was as anxious to prevent scandal as any father could have been; and now it occurred to him that he

had begun at the wrong end, as he said. Women were kittle cattle. He had failed when he dwelt upon the danger to herself. Perhaps he might succeed better if he represented the danger to *him*.

'I have made a mistake,' said the hypocritical old man. 'It can do no harm to you, all that has come and gone. I was thinking of my own selfish kind that give most weight to what affects themselves, and I am rightly punished. A lady *sans reproche* like yourself may well be *sans peur*. But that is not the whole question, my dear madam. There is the man to be considered.'

When he said this she raised her eyes, which had been fixed on her work, and looked at him with some anxiety, which was so much gained.

'You will not doubt my word when I say there's a great difference between men and women,' said the old diplomatist. 'What is innocent for one is often very dangerous for the other, and *vice versâ*: you will not deny that.'

Then he made a pause, and looking at her for reply, received a sign of assent to

his vague proposition, which indeed was safe enough.

'How can you tell that Mr. Beresford receives as pure benevolence all the kindness you show him? It is very unusual kindness. You are kind to everybody, madam, above the ordinary level; and human creatures are curious—they think it is their merit that makes you good to them, not your own bounty.'

She did not make any reply, but continued to look at him. Her attention at least was secured.

'If I were to tell you the instances of this that have come under my own observation! I have known a poor creature who got much kindness in a house on account of his defects and deficiencies, and because everybody was sorry for him; who gave it out, if you'll believe me, and really thought, that what his kind friends wanted was to marry him to the daughter of the house! It's not uncommon, and I dare say, without going further, that you can remember things—which perhaps you have laughed at——'

'All this has nothing to do with Mr. Beresford,' she said, quietly, but with a flush of rising offence.

'No, no.' He made a hesitating answer and looked at her. Mrs. Meredith fell into the snare.

'If he has misunderstood my sympathy for his troubles, if he has ventured to suppose——'

'Cara has gone out with her aunt,' said Edward, coming in hastily; 'but there is surely something wrong in the house. Mr. Beresford called me into his room, looking very much distressed. He told me to tell you that he thought of leaving home directly; then changed his mind, and said I was not to tell you.'

'Why *do* you tell me then?' cried his mother, with impatience. 'What is it to me where he is going? Am I always to be worried with other people's troubles? I think I have plenty of my own without that.'

Edward looked at her with great surprise. Such outbreaks of impatience from his gentle mother were almost unknown to him. 'He looks very ill,' he said; 'very much disturbed: something must have happened. Why should not I tell you? Are you not interested in our old friend? Then something very extraordinary *has* happened, I suppose?'

'Oh, my boy,' cried Mrs. Meredith, in her

excitement, 'that is what Mr. Sommerville has come about. He says poor James Beresford comes too often here. He says I am too kind to him, and that people will talk, and he himself thinks —— Ah!' she cried suddenly, 'what am I saying to the boy?'

Edward went up to her hurriedly and put his arm round her, and thus standing looked round defiant at the meddler. Oswald, too, entered the room at this moment. The hour for luncheon approached, and naturally called these young men, still in the first bloom of their fine natural appetites, from all corners of the house. 'What's the matter?' he said. But he had another verse of his poem in his head which he was in great haste to write down, and he crossed over to the writing-table in the back drawing-room, and did not wait for any reply. Edward, on the contrary, put the white shield of his own youthfulness at once in front of his mother, and indignant met the foe.

'People have talked a long time, I suppose,' said Edward, 'that there was nobody so kind as my mother; and I suppose because you have trained us, mamma, we don't understand what it means to be too kind. You do, sir?' cried

the young man with generous impertinence; 'you think it is possible to be too innocent—too good?'

'Yes, you young idiot!' cried the old man, jumping up in a momentary fury. Then he cooled down and reseated himself with a laugh. 'There is the bell for lunch,' he said; 'and I don't mean to be cheated out of the luncheon, which, of course, you will give me, by the freaks of these puppies of yours, madam. But Oswald is a philosopher; he takes it easy,' he added, looking keenly at the placid indifference of the elder son.

'Oswald takes everything easy,' said Mrs. Meredith, with a sigh. And they went downstairs to luncheon, and no man could have been more cheerful, more agreeable than the old Indian. He told them a hundred stories, and paid Mrs. Meredith at least a score of compliments. 'This indulgence will put it out of my power to be at your levée this afternoon,' he said; 'but there will be plenty of worshippers without me. I think the neglected women in this town—and no doubt there's many—should bring a prosecution against ladies like you, Mrs. Meredith, that charm more than your

share; and both sexes alike, men and women. I hear but one chorus, "There's nobody so delightful as Mrs. Meredith," wherever I go.'

'We are all proud of your approbation,' said Oswald, with much solemnity: he was always light-hearted, and had no desire to inquire particularly into the commotion of which he had been a witness. But Edward kept his eyes upon his mother, who was pale with the excitement she had come through. What that excitement meant the young man had very little idea. Something had disturbed her, which was enough for her son; and, curiously enough, something had disturbed the neighbours too, whom Edward accepted without criticism as we accept people whom we have known all our lives. He was curious, and rather anxious, wondering what it might be.

But as for Mrs. Meredith, the idea of communicating to her sons even the suggestion that she could be spoken of with levity, or criticised as a woman, appalled her when she thought of it. She had cried out, appealing to the boys in her agitation, but the moment after felt that she could bear anything rather than make them aware that anyone had ventured

upon a word to her on such subjects. She exerted herself to be as vivacious as her visitor; and as vivacity was not in her way, the little forced gaiety of her manner attracted the attention of her sons more than the greatest seriousness would have done. Even Oswald was roused to observe this curious change. 'What has happened?' he said to his brother. He thought the Spy had been finding fault with the expenditure of the household, and thought with alarm of his own bills, which had a way of coming upon him as a surprise when he least expected them. It was almost the only thing that could have roused him to interest, for Oswald felt the things that affected Oswald to be of more importance than anything else could be. As for Edward, he awaited somewhat tremulously the disclosure which he expected after Mr. Sommerville's departure. But Mrs. Meredith avoided both of them in the commotion of her feelings. She shut herself up in her own room to ponder the question, and, as was natural, her proud impulse of resistance yielded to reflection. Her heart ached a good deal for poor Beresford, a little for herself. She, too, would miss something. Some-

thing would be gone out of her life which was good and pleasant. Her heart gave a little sob, a sudden ache came into her being. Was there harm in it? she asked herself, aghast. Altogether the day was not a pleasant one for Mrs. Meredith. It seemed to plunge her back into those agitations of youth from which surely middle age ought to deliver a woman. It wronged her in her own eyes, making even her generous temper a shame to her. Had she been too good? as he said—too kind? an accusation which is hurtful, and means something like insult to a woman, though to no other creature. Too kind! No expression of contempt, no insinuated slander can be more stinging than this imputation of having been too kind. Had she been too kind to her sorrowful neighbour? had she led him to believe that her kindness was something more than kindness? She, whose special distinction it was to be kind, whose daily court was established on no other foundation, whose kindness was the breath of her nostrils; was this quality, of which she had come to be modestly conscious, and of which, perhaps, she was a little proud, to be the instrument of her humiliation?

She was not a happy wife, nor indeed a wife at all, except in distant and not very pleasant recollection, and in the fact that she had a watchful husband, at the end of the world, keeping guard over her. Was it possible that she had given occasion for his interference, laid herself open to his scorn? It seemed to the poor woman as if heaven and earth had leagued against her. Too kind; suspected by the jealous man who watched her, despised by the ungrateful man by whom her tender generosity had been misinterpreted! She sent down a message to Cara that she was not going out. She sent word to her visitors that she had a headache. She saw nobody all day long. Too kind! The accusation stung in the tenderest point, and was more than she could bear.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN IDEALIST.

When Agnes Burchell encountered Oswald Meredith, as has been recorded, she had but recently taken up her abode at the 'House.' She had gone there much against the will of her family, actuated by that discontent which many generations may have felt, but only the present generation has confessed and justified. Agnes was the eldest daughter of a very prosaic pair, born in a very prosaic household, and how it was that the ideal had caught her in its tenacious grip nobody knew. In the Rectory at the foot of the hill, noisy with children, greasy with bread and butter, between a fat father who prosed and a stout mother who grumbled, the girl had set her heart, from the very beginning of conscious sentiment in her, upon some more excellent way. How this was to be reached she had not been able to

divine for years, and many pious struggles had poor Agnes against her own better desires, many attempts to subdue herself and to represent to herself that the things she had to do were her duty and the best things for her. Between exhortations to the service of God in its most spiritual sense, and exhortations to be contented 'in that condition of life to which God had called her,' her heart was rent and her life distracted. Was there, indeed, nothing better in the world than to cut the bread and butter, like Werther's Charlotte, to darn the stockings, to listen to parish gossip and her mother's standing grievance, which was that Cherry Beresford, an old maid, should be well off and drive about in her carriage, while she, the Rector's wife, went painfully afoot—and her father's twaddle about the plague of Dissenters and the wickedness of curates? Agnes tried very hard to accommodate herself to these circumstances of her lot. She tried to change the tone of the family talk, making herself extremely disagreeable to everybody in so doing. She tried to reduce the children to obedience and to bring order into the unruly house, and in so doing got herself soundly rated

by everybody. Who was she that she should take upon her to be superior to her neighbours —to set them all right? The rest of the Burchells were very comfortable in their state of hugger-mugger, and that she should pretend a dislike to it aggravated them all deeply—while all the time she was informed, both in sermons and in good books, that to do the duty nearest to your hand was the most heroic Christian duty. Poor Agnes could not see her way to do any duty at all. There were three sisters over sixteen, more than could be employed upon the stockings and the bread and butter. Then she tried the parish, but found with humiliation that with neither soup, nor puddings, nor little bottles of wine, nor even tracts to carry about, her visits were but little prized. Louisa, her next sister, answered better in every way than she did: when Louisa was scolded she scolded back again in a filial manner, having the last word always. She boxed the children's ears, and pushed them about, and read a novel—when she could get one—in an untidy room, with unkempt brothers and sisters round, and took no notice; neither

the disobedience, nor the untidiness, nor even unjust reproof when it came her way having any particular effect upon her. Louisa did what she was obliged to do, and knew nothing about the ideal. But Agnes did not know what to make of herself. She was called by absurd nicknames of mock respect by the others—the 'princess' and 'your royal highness,' and so forth; and Mrs. Burchell seldom lost an opportunity of saying, 'Agnes thinks she knows better, of course; but my old-fashioned ways are good enough for the rest of us.' Thus year after year went over her young head, each one increasing her inappropriateness—the want of any fit place for her where she was. It was against the pride of the family that she should go out as a governess, and, indeed, she was not sufficiently educated herself to teach anyone else. She was at the very height of discomfort when there dawned upon her the prospect of doing something better in the 'House,' serving the poor, teaching the untaught. The Rectory was very full at the time, and her room was much wanted for an uncle who was coming to pay a

visit; but yet, notwithstanding this great immediate convenience, there was much resistance made.

Mr. Burchell's Church politics were undecided. He was only entering upon the path of Ritualism, starting mildly under the guidance of a curate, with Saint's-day services, and the beginning of a choir; and the name of a Sisterhood frightened him. As for Mrs. Burchell, her indignation knew no bounds. 'Your duty is at home, you ungrateful girl, where your father and I have stinted ourselves to let you have everything that is comfortable. And now you go and leave me to work night and day among the children. I who have no strength for it——' 'There is Louisa, mamma,' said Agnes; upon which Louisa cried with indignation, and asked if *everything* was to be left upon her—and all the little boys and girls looked on from the corners with demure delight to watch the progress of the 'shindy' between Agnes and mamma. At last, however, after many scenes of this kind, Agnes was allowed to go free. She went to London, and set herself up with a modified uniform, and was as glad and triumphant as if it was the noblest

vocation in the world which she had thus struggled into. Alas! it was not very long before the bonds of the prosaic earth again galled her, and the ideal seemed as far off as ever. Ignoble breakfasts and dinners and teas are as ignoble in a charitable 'House' as in an overcrowded Rectory; and here, too, there was gossip and unruliness, and want of discipline, and very poor success in the elevation of life out of its beggarly elements. To teach children their A B C is not an inspiriting occupation, even when the children are destitute and orphans. It was so hard to realise that they were so. The poor little wretches were just as tiresome and insubordinate as if they had been her own brothers and sisters: nothing of the sentiment of their position hung about them. And the Sisters were extremely business-like, and did their duty without a tinge of romance, as if they had been hired to do it. The awakening had been sharp for Agnes, but she had already got beyond the first stage, and was now fighting with her disappointment and arguing herself back into satisfaction. It is impossible to tell what a help to her was the breaking of little Emmy's leg. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good.

She would have liked to nurse her altogether, but at least to go to her to the hospital, to cheer her, and whisper consolation—that was something; and when the child's face brightened at her coming, Agnes, with a sudden throb of her heart, felt that at least for the moment here was the ideal for which she had sighed. Here was some real good of her. But for her nobody would have visited little Emmy: they would have been content to hear that she was doing well: that smile of half-celestial happiness upon the poor little sick face would never have reflected heaven but for Agnes. It was the first approach to contentment in her own occupation which she had ever felt. And she had to work all the harder to get herself this pleasure, which made her satisfaction still more warm.

But—whether it was right to talk to the stranger who was so very much interested in poor little Emmy afterwards!—was that a part of the ideal, too? To be sure he had a right to inquire—he had been present at the accident, and had carried the child in his arms to the hospital—how very kindly!—and talked with what understanding! and an enthusiasm

which was balm to Agnes, and partially re-kindled her own. That he should ask was quite natural; that he should walk with her back to the 'House' had seemed very natural, too. Quite natural—he did not look as if he thought it a thing even to apologize about, but went on with quiet simplicity, going the same way as she did. Agnes felt that, as a young lady at home, it would have appeared perhaps a little odd that a stranger should have done this; but she reflected with a thrill, half of pleasure, half of annoyance, that the uniform of a Sister had its disadvantages as well as its advantages, and that while it protected her from all rudeness, it at the same time broke the ceremonial bonds of politeness, and left her open to be addressed with frank simplicity by all classes of people. She had thought it right to let him know that she was not a Sister, but only a teacher, but it had made no difference in him. Perhaps (she explained to herself) it was the fact that there were nothing but women at the 'House,' which gave a certain piquancy to this conversation with a man; for the clergy, in their cassocks, were but a kind of half and half, and talked just in the same tone as Sister

Mary Jane about the business of the 'House,' and subscriptions, and the balance-sheet, and what the Vicar thought, which was the final test of everything. Why did she like this stranger so much better than the clergy? It was because his tone and his looks and what he said were a little variety, and breathed of the outside world and the wider horizon. To be sure, it had seemed to her a little while ago that everything noblest and highest was to be had within the 'House,' where so many consecrated souls were giving themselves up to the service of God and the poor. But being inside had modified the views with which she had contemplated the 'House' from without. The world itself, the wicked and foolish world, though no less foolish and wicked, had gained a certain interest. There was variety in it: it was perhaps more amusing than the 'House.' These thoughts filled the mind of Agnes as the door, which was always kept locked, was closed upon her. The horizon grew narrower as she came in—that was a natural effect, for of course four straight walls must cut out a great deal of sky—but the effect seemed greater than usual that day. She felt shut in; nothing could be easier

than to unlock the door, though it looked so heavy—but there was a feeling of confinement somehow in the air. Agnes had to go into the severe Gothic room, with windows high in the wall, where the children were coming in to tea, while Mr. Oswald Meredith walked away in the free air as he pleased, holding his head high. She breathed a soft sigh unawares. Where was the ideal now? There came upon her a vision of the woods and the Hill, and the winding paths that led to it, and of the four winds that were always blowing there, and the leaves that answered to every breath. What a thing it would be to thread through the woods, as she had done so often, with the wind fresh in her face, chill but vigorous, breathing life and exhilaration! How one's ideal shifts and changes about when one is twenty! The 'House' looked poor indeed in the weariful afternoon about the darkening, full of the odour of weak tea.

Things grew very serious, however, next week, when, exactly as it happened before, just as she came out of the hospital from her visit to Emmy, Mr. Oswald Meredith once more appeared. He was both sorry and glad in a

breath—sorry to be too late for personal inquiries, glad to have been so fortunate as just to find her—the best authority about the child.

'I felt sure you would be going to see her,' he said. 'Little Emmy is a lucky little girl. May I hear how she is getting on? though I scarcely deserve it for being so late.'

He turned as he spoke to walk with her, and what could Agnes do? She could not refuse to answer him, or show any prudery. He evidently (she said to herself) thought nothing of it; why should she appear to demur to anything so simple? Give a report about a suffering child? Anyone might do that—to anyone. And she told him that Emmy was making satisfactory progress, though she had been feverish and ill. 'I was a little frightened, though the nurse said it was nothing. She wandered, and spoke so strangely for a little while. Poor little Emmy! She had a beautiful dream, and thought herself in heaven.'

'While you were there?' said Oswald, with a significance in the simple question which covered her face with a sudden blush. Then she blushed deeper still to think what foolish, unpardonable vanity this was—vanity the most

extraordinary, the most silly! What he meant, *of course*, was a simple question, most natural —an inquiry about a fact, not any wicked compliment. How Agnes hated and despised herself for the warm suffusion of shy pleasure which she had felt in her heart and on her face!

'Yes,' she said, demurely; 'but she soon roused up and came quite to herself. She had been in great pain, and they had given her something to deaden it, that was all.'

'I quite understand,' he said, with again that appearance of meaning more than he said. No doubt it was merely his way; and it was embarrassing, but not so disagreeable as perhaps it ought to have been. Agnes kept her head down, and slightly turned away, so that this stranger could not see the inappropriate blushes which came and went under the bonnet of the Sisterhood. Then there was a pause; and she wondered within herself whether it would be best to turn down a cross-street and feign an errand, which would take her out of the straight road to the 'House'—evidently that was *his* way—and by this means she might escape his close attendance. But then, to in-

vent a fictitious errand would be unquestionably wrong; whereas, to allow a gentleman whom she did not know to walk along the public pavement, to which everybody had an equal right, by her side, was only problematically wrong. Thus Agnes hesitated, in a flutter, between two courses. So long as they were not talking it seemed more simple that he should be walking the same way.

'What a strange world a hospital must be,' he said. 'I have been watching the people coming out' ('Then he was not late, after all,' Agnes remarked to herself), 'some of them pleased, some anxious, but the most part indifferent. Indifference always carries the day. Is that why the world goes on so steadily, whatever happens? Here and there is one who shows some feeling——'

'It is because the greater part of the patients are not very ill,' said Agnes, responding instantly to this challenge. 'Oh, no, people are not indifferent. I know that is what is said—that we eat our dinners in spite of everything——'

'And don't we? or, rather, don't they? Ourselves are always excepted, I suppose,' said

Oswald, delighted to have set afloat one of those abstract discussions which young talkers, aware of a pleasant faculty of turning sentences, love.

'Why should ourselves be excepted?' said Agnes, forgetting her shyness. 'Why should it always be supposed that we who speak are better than our neighbours? Oh, I have seen so much of that! people who know only a little, little circle setting down all the rest of the world as wicked. Why? If I am unhappy when anyone I love is in trouble, that is a reason for believing that others are so too; not that others are indifferent——'

'Ah,' said Oswald, 'to judge the world by yourself would be well for the world, but disappointing for you, I fear. I am an optimist, too; but I would not go so far as that.'

She gave him a sudden look, half-inquiring, half-impatient. 'One knows more harm of one's self than one can know of anyone else,' she said, with the dogmatism of youth.

He laughed. 'I see now why you judge people more leniently than I do. What quantities of harm *I* must know that *you* could not believe possible! What is life like, I wonder,

up on those snowy heights so near the sky?—a beautiful soft psalm, with just a half-tone wrong here and there to show that it is outside heaven——'

'Indeed, indeed, you are mistaken! I—I am not a Sister—you mistake me,' said Agnes, in agitation. 'It is only the dress——'

'You are doing just what you condemn,' he said; 'setting me down as a superficial person able to judge only by the outside. I have superior pretensions. Is my friend Sister Mary Jane the Superior of the convent? But I suppose you don't call it a convent? I have only known them in France.'

'We call it only "the House"; but I have never been in France—never out of England at all. Is it not like going into a different world?' Agnes took up this subject eagerly, to escape the embarrassment of the other; and fortunately the House itself was already in sight.

'The very same world, only differently dressed. I suppose there is something harmonious in a uniform. All the nuns have a kind of beauty, not the pensive kind one expects; or perhaps it is the white head-dress

and the calm life that give the Sisters such pretty complexions, and such clear eyes. Sister Mary Jane, for instance—you will allow that the Sisters are calm——'

'But not indifferent!' said Agnes, moved to an answering smile, as they reached the safe door of the House. She threw that smile at him as a farewell defiance as she went up to the locked door which opened to her with an alarming sound of keys turning, like the door of a true convent of romance, though it was in a London street. He lingered, but she did not look back. She was very thankful to reach that safe shelter, and find herself delivered from the doubtful privilege of his attendance. And yet somehow the afternoon darkened suddenly, the sky clouded over as she went in, and her heart sank she could not tell how. Why should her heart sink? She had scarcely got indoors before she was met by Sister Mary Jane, who asked for little Emmy with business-like brevity; then, just pausing for a reply, went on to talk of work, the subject which filled all her thoughts.

'Go, please, and take care of the middle girls at relaxation: they are in St. Cecilia;

and keep your eye on Marian Smith, who has already lost five marks for untidiness; and Araminta Blunt, who is in punishment for talking. And see that relaxation is ended, and they all begin learning their lessons at 6.30. I must take the elder girls myself for an hour before evensong. Have you had tea?' said Sister Mary Jane. 'No? Then go quickly, please, my dear, and have some. It is not cleared away yet. The infants have been rather unruly, and I mean to speak to the Vicar about it this evening. We want some one else to help with the infants. In St. Cecilia, yes. Make haste, my dear.'

Agnes went into the large room which was called the refectory—the banqueting-hall of the establishment—where the air was heavy with tea and bread and butter, and the long tables, partially cleared, still bore traces of the repast. It was a large room; the walls enlivened with Scriptural pictures, and rich with lines of coloured bricks unplastered. The servants of the House were not of a very superior class, as may be supposed, and to see them pushing about the cups and saucers, rattling down the heavy trays full of fragments, and

hustling each other about the tables, was not exhilarating. How closed in and confined everything looked, how dreary the atmosphere, the evening so much more advanced than out of doors! Agnes tried to drink with contentment her lukewarm cup of tea, and to think with satisfaction of the middle girls who awaited her in St. Cecilia. But it was astonishing how difficult she felt it to do this. The summer afternoon skies, the soft breathing of the spring air, the long distances—though they were but lines of streets—and wide atmosphere—though it was tinged with London smoke—which lay outside these walls, had suggested sentiments so different. The sentiments which they would have suggested to Sister Mary Jane would have been quite unlike those that filled the mind of Agnes. She would have said it was a sweet evening, and hurried in to work. The smell of the tea did not sicken her, nor the sight of the used cups and the stains here and there on the cloth, where an unruly child (doomed to lose her marks for neatness) had pulled over her cup. She thought that to superintend the middle girls at relaxation was as pleasant an occupation as could be found—

and that a walk through the streets was a weariness to the flesh. As for Mr. Oswald Meredith, except that it was very nice of him to have given such a good subscription to the House, she would not have considered him worthy a glance—her mind was busy about other things. She had to take the girls for an hour before evensong, and afterwards had to look over their exercises and inspect the books, and hear the reports of the teachers. Araminta Blunt, who was in punishment for talking, and Marian Smith, who had lost five marks for untidiness, were of more interest to her than all the ideals in the world. She was very kind to fanciful Agnes, as well as to everybody else, but she had no time to indulge in fancies for her own part. She gave her directions to one and another as she went along the passage. There was not a minute of her valuable time which she could afford to lose. Agnes thought of all this with a sigh as she went to St. Cecilia, where the middle girls awaited her. Would she ever be as satisfied with her work, as pleased with her surroundings, as Sister Mary Jane? And was it not her duty to endeavour to make herself so? For she could not say to

herself as she had done at home that this was mere carelessness and apathetic resignation to the common course of events. Here, on the contrary, it was self-sacrifice that was the rule, and consecration to the service of the helpless. The poor girl was young; perhaps that was the chief drawback in her way. The softness of the skies, the speculative delights of conversation, the look of Oswald Meredith as he spoke of 'the snowy heights so near the sky,' what had these mere chance circumstances, which she had encountered unawares, to do with the serious life which she had herself selected as the best? And, alas! was St. Cecilia, with the girls at relaxation, anything like those 'snowy heights?' The little squabbles, the little fibs, the little jealousies which the children indulged in none the less for being in the interesting position of orphans, helpless and friendless children, with no father but God, jarred upon her more and more as this poetical imagination of her life came back to her mind. Surely he must be a poet. This was her concluding thought.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE 'HOUSE.'

ROGER had not renewed his visit to Cara for some weeks. He had been too much cast down and discouraged by that first Sunday for which he had prepared so elaborately, and looked forward to with so much eagerness. But discouragement, like everything else, wears out, and when he had gone round the circle from anger to disapproval, from disapproval to contempt, from contempt to pity, Roger found himself with some surprise back at his original point, longing to see Cara, and ready to believe that anything that had come between them had been accidental. The two Merediths would not be there for ever, and Cara no doubt, poor girl, must be pining for some one from her old home, and would be glad to see him, and hear all that everybody was doing. He was sorry he had said a word to his mother about what happened

in the Square; indeed he had done nothing but regret ever since the indiscretion which tempted him to complain; for Mrs. Burchell was one of those inconvenient persons who never forget the indignant criticisms of injured feeling, but continue to repeat and harp upon it long after that feeling has sunk into oblivion or changed into contempt. Very soon the softening influences of his early love, and the longing he had after the object of it, made Roger forgive Cara all her imagined sins against him; but his mother could not forget that he had been slighted, and punished his betrayal of his wound by incessant reference to the evils in the Square. This of itself helped on his recovery, since to find fault yourself with those to whom you are attached is a very different thing from hearing them assailed by others. The process ended by a serious quarrel with Mrs. Burchell, who would not give up this favourite subject, and taunted her son with his want of proper pride, and inclination to put up with anything, when she heard of his intention to go back. 'If I had been so treated anywhere, I would never go near them again. I would not invite people to trample upon me,' cried the Rector's wife. 'I might forgive, but

I should never forget.' 'My dear,' the Rector had said, 'Roger has himself to look to: we are not able to do very much for him; and Cara will be a kind of heiress. I should not mind any trifle of that sort, if he has serious views.' 'What do you call serious views?' cried Roger, ashamed and wretched, and he plunged out of the house without waiting for an answer, and betook himself to those wintry woods of which Agnes was thinking at the 'House,' and which even in winter were sweet. Roger had no sordid intentions, which was what his father meant by 'serious' views; and though he was well enough satisfied with his daily work, and not, like Agnes, troubled by any ideal, yet he felt, like his sister, the wretched downfall of existence into misery and meanness, between his mother's prolonged and exaggerated resentment and his father's serious worldliness. That boyish love of his was the highest thing in the young man's mind. If nothing else that was visionary existed in his nature, his semi-adoration of Cara, which had lasted as long as he could recollect, was visionary, a touch of poetry amid his prose, and to hear it opposed or to hear it sordidly encouraged alike shocked and

revolted him. He resolved never to mention Cara's name again, nor to make any reference to the Square, to shut up his sentiments about her in his own bosom, whether these were sentiments of admiration or of offence. Supposing she was cold to him—and it would be very natural that she should be cold, as he had never gone back to her, nor visited her but once—he would bear it and make no sign; never again would he subject her name to comments such as these. Fathers and mothers do badly by their children when they force them to such a resolution. Roger kept his word all through the weary Sunday, and did not say even that he would not return home for the next; but he made his arrangements all the same.

When the next Sunday came the heart of the aunt at Notting Hill was once more gladdened by the sight of him; and in the afternoon he duly set out for the Square. Perhaps his dress was not so elaborate nor his necktie so remarkable as when he first went there. He had sworn to himself that he would form no special expectations and make no grand preparations, and on the whole he was happier on his second visit. Miss Cherry, whom he found at the Square, was very glad to

see him, and Mr. Beresford spoke to him kindly enough, and Cara was sweet and friendly. But they treated his visit as a call only; they did not ask him to dinner, which was a disappointment. They offered him a cup of tea, which Roger did not care for, being scarcely fashionable enough to like five o'clock tea, and let him go when they went to dinner, forlorn enough, turning him out as it were upon the streets full of people. To be sure Roger had his aunt at Notting Hill, who was very glad to see him, who would give him supper and make him very comfortable. Still, as he had hoped perhaps to be asked to stay, to spend the evening with Cara, it gave him a very forlorn sensation, when they bade him cheerfully good-bye at the sound of the dinner-bell. He went out into the evening streets, where many people were going to church, and many coming back from their afternoon walk, going home to their families in twos and threes. Scarcely anyone seemed to be alone but himself. Still he said to himself he had no right to grumble, for they had been kind—and next Sunday he would go again; and with this melancholy yet courageous resolution he made a little pause at the corner of

the street, asking himself where he should go now? His aunt would have taken tea and gone to evening church before he could get to Notting Hill. So he changed his direction and went manfully the other way, to the 'House,' to visit his sister, arguing his disappointment down. Why should they have asked him to dinner? Besides, he did not go for dinner, which would have been mercenary, but for Cara—and he had seen Cara, without those Merediths thrusting themselves into his way; and she had been very kind, and Miss Cherry had been kind, and there was no reason why he should not go again next Sunday afternoon. So why should he be discouraged? There was Agnes, whom he had not seen since she had gone into this 'House,' as they called it. It was only right that a man should go and look after his own sister, even if he did not approve of her. So Roger employed his undesired hour of leisure in the way of duty, and went to see Agnes, gradually calming himself down out of his disappointment on the way.

The Burchells were not what is called a family devoted to each other. They were good enough friends, and took a proper brotherly and sisterly interest in what happened to each

other, especially as every new piece of family news brought a certain amount of enlivenment and variety and a new subject for conversation into the monotonous family life; but they were prosaic, and Agnes was the one among them whom the others did not understand much, and not understanding, set down bluntly as fantastic and incomprehensible. Had she fallen in love with somebody or had a 'disappointment,' they would have entered to a certain degree into her feelings, and even now Roger could not quite divest himself of the thought, that, though he knew nothing of it, something of this kind must be at the root of her withdrawal from home. An ideal life, what was that? Neither Roger nor any of the rest understood what she could mean, or really believed that there was any sincerity in such a pretext; and he indeed was one of those who had been most opposed to her purpose; asking scornfully what advantage she supposed she was to get by going among strangers? Was she better than the other girls, that she could not make herself comfortable at home? Was there not plenty to do there, if that was what she wanted? Was there not the parish, if she wanted more work? Roger had

been alike indignant and astonished. But the thing was done, and he was in town, not very far off from where she was, with an hour or two to spare. He went with a secret antagonism against everything he was likely to see. The very name of the place nettled him. The 'House!' as if it was a penitentiary or shelter for the destitute, which *his* sister had been obliged to find refuge in. He was admitted on giving full particulars as to who he was, and ushered into the bare little room, covered with dusty matting, with religious prints of the severest character on the walls, and bookshelves full of school-books. St. Monica was emblazoned on the door of it, which name offended him too. Could not the foolish people call it the brown room, or the matted room, or by any common appellation, instead of by the name of a saint, whom nobody had ever heard of? Agnes came to him, not in the dress which she wore out of doors, but in a simple black gown, fortunately for her, for what avalanche of objections would have tumbled upon her head had she come in to him in her cape and poke-bonnet! He was pleased to see his sister and pleased by her delight at the sight of him, but yet he could not

smooth his brow out of displeasure. It gave him an outlet for the subdued irritation with which he had received his dismissal from the Square.

'Well, Agnes,' he said, 'so here you are in this papistical place. I had an hour to spare, and I thought I would come and see you.'

'I am so glad to see you, Roger. I was just thinking of them all at home.'

'At home! You were anxious enough to get away from home. I wish anyone knew why. I can't fancy anything so unnatural as a girl wishing to leave home, except on a visit, or if she is going to be married, or that sort of thing—but to come to a place like this! Agnes, I am sure there is no one belonging to you who knows why.'

'Yes,' said Agnes, quietly, 'because I wanted to do something more, to do some duty in the world, not to be like a vegetable in the garden.'

'That is just the slang of the period,' said wise Roger, 'You can't say there is not plenty to do with all the children to look after; and one never can get a button sewed on now.'

'Louisa and Liddy were quite able to do all and more than all—why should there be three

of us sewing on buttons? And what were we to come to—nothing but buttons all our lives?'

'Why, I suppose,' said Roger, doubtfully—'what do girls ever come to? You would have been married some time.'

'And that is such a delightful prospect!' cried Agnes, moved to sarcasm. 'Oh, Roger, is it such an elevated life to jog along as papa—as we have seen people do, thinking of nothing but how to get through the day, and pay the bills, and have a good dinner when we can, and grumble at our neighbours, the children running wild, and the house getting shabby?' said Agnes, unconsciously falling into portraiture, 'and talking about the service of God? What is the service of God? Is it just to be comfortable and do what you are obliged to do?'

'Well, I suppose it is not to make yourself uncomfortable,' cried Roger, shirking the more serious question. 'Though, as for that, if you wished, you could be quite uncomfortable enough at home. What do they mean by calling a room after a woman, St. Monica? and all these cruci fixes and things—and that ridiculous dress—I am glad to see you have the sense not to wear it here at least.'

'I wear it when I go out; it is not ridiculous; one can go where one pleases, that is, wherever one is wanted, in a Sister's dress, and the roughest people always respect it,' said Agnes, warmly. 'Oh, Roger, why should you be so prejudiced? Do you know what kind of people are here? Poor helpless, friendless children, that have got no home, and the Sisters are like mothers to them. Is that no good? What does it matter about the name of the room, if a poor destitute baby is fed and warmed, and made happy in it? Children that would starve and beg and rob in the streets, or die—that would be the alternative, if these Sisters with their absurd dresses and their ridiculous ways, that make you so angry, did not step in.'

'Well, I suppose they may do some good,' said Roger, unwillingly. 'You need not get so hot about it; but you might do just as much good with less fuss. And why should you shut yourself up in a penitentiary as if you had done something you were ashamed of? Why should you slave and teach for your living? We are not so poor as that. If the brothers all work,' said Roger, with a not unbecoming glow of

pride, 'there ought always to be plenty for the sisters at home.'

'But I must live my life too, as well as my brothers; and do what I can before the night comes,' said Agnes, with a little solemnity, 'when no man can work.'

Roger was subdued by the quotation more than by all her reasons. He could not, as he said to himself, go against Scripture, which certainly did exhort every man to work before the night cometh. Did that mean every woman too?

'The short and the long of it is,' he said, half sulkily, half melted, 'that you were never content at home, Agnes. Are you contented here?'

That was a home question. Agnes shrank a little and faltered, avoiding a direct reply.

'You do not look very contented yourself. Have you been to see Cara?' she said. 'How is she? I have not heard a word of her since I came here.'

'Oh, Cara is well enough. She is not like you, setting up for eccentric work. She is quite happy at home. Miss Cherry is there at present, looking after her. It is a handsome house, choke full of china and things. And I

suppose, from all I hear, she has a very jolly life,' said Roger, with a certain shade of moroseness creeping over his face, 'parties and lots of friends.'

'I daresay she does not forget the people she used to like, for all that,' said Agnes, more kind than he was, and divining the uncontent in his face.

'Oh, I don't know. There are some people who never leave her alone, who pretend to be old friends too,' said Roger, ruefully. 'And they live next door, worse luck; they are always there. Other old friends have no chance beside these Merediths.'

'Oh!—is their name Meredith?'

'Yes; do you know them? There is one, a palavering fellow, talks twenty to the dozen, and thinks no end of himself—a sneering beggar. I don't mind the other so much; but that Oswald fellow——'

'Oh!—is his name Oswald?'

'I believe you know him. Do swells like that come a-visiting here?'

'Oh, no,' said Agnes, anxiously smoothing down suspicion; 'there is a name—much the same—in Sister Mary Jane's list of subscriptions.

Oh, yes; and the gentleman carried a poor child to the hospital so very kindly. I noticed the name, because—because there is a poet called Oswald, or Owen, or something, Meredith. I wondered,' said Agnes, faltering, telling the truth but meaning a fib, 'whether it could be the same.'

'Quite likely,' said Roger; 'the very kind of fellow that would write poetry and stuff—a sentimental duffer. To tell the truth,' he added, with immense seriousness, 'I don't like to have little Cara exposed to all his rubbishing talk. She is as simple as a little angel, and believes all that's said to her; and when a fellow like that gets a girl into a corner, and whispers and talks stuff——' Roger continued, growing red and wroth.

Agnes did not make any reply. She turned round to examine the school-books with a sudden start—and, oh me! what curious, sudden pang was that, as if an arrow had been suddenly shot at her, which struck right through her heart?

'Cara should not let anyone whisper to her in corners,' she said at last, with a little sharpness, after her first shock. 'She is too young

for anything of that sort; and she is old enough to know better,' she added, more sharply still. But Roger did not notice this contradiction. He was too much interested to notice exactly what was said.

'She is too young to be exposed to all that,' he said, mournfully; 'how is she to find out at seventeen which is false and which is true? There now, Agnes, see what you might have done, had not you shut yourself up here. Nothing so likely as that Cara would have asked you to go and pay her a visit—and you could have taken care of her. But you know how romantic poor dear Miss Cherry is—and I should not be a bit surprised if that child allowed herself to be taken in, and threw herself away.'

And would this be the fault of Agnes, who had shut herself up in the House, and thus precluded all possibility of being chosen as the guardian and companion of Cara? She smiled a little to herself, not without a touch of bitterness; though, indeed, after all, if help to one's neighbour is the chief thing to be considered in life, it was as worthy a work to take care of Cara as to teach the orphans their A B C. This

news of Roger's, however, introduced, he did not well know how, a discord in the talk. He fell musing upon the risk to which his little lady was exposed, and she got distracted with other thoughts. She sat beside him, in her plain, long black gown, every ornament of her girlhood put away from her; her hands, which had been very pretty white hands, loosely clasped on the table before her, and showing some signs of injury. It is only in romances that the hands of women engaged in various household labours retain their beauty all the same. Agnes had now a little of everything thrown in her way to do, and was required not to be squeamish about the uses she put these pretty hands to; and it could not be denied that they were a little less pretty already. She looked down upon them in her sudden rush of thought and perceived this. What did it matter to the young handmaid of the poor whether or not her hands were as pretty as usual? but yet, with an instantaneous comparison, her mind rushed to Cara, who had no necessity to soil her pretty fingers, and to the contrast which might be made between them. What did it matter that it was wicked and wrong of Agnes, self-devoted

and aspiring to be God's servant, to feel like this? The wave of nature was too strong for her, and carried her away.

'Well, I must be going,' said Roger, with a sigh. 'I am glad that I have seen you, and found you—comfortable. There does not seem much here to tempt anyone; but still if you like it—I am coming back next Sunday. Aunt Mary is pleased to have me, and they don't seem to care at home whether one goes or stays. I shall probably look in at the Square. Shall I tell Cara about you? She knows you have gone away from home, but not where you are. She might come to see you.'

'I don't want any visitors,' said Agnes, with a little irritation of feeling, which, with all the rest of her misdeeds, was laid up in her mind to be repented of. 'We have no time for them, for one thing; and half-measures are of little use. If I do not mean to give myself altogether to my work, I had better not have come at all. Do not mention my name to Cara. I don't want to see anyone here.'

'Well, I suppose you are right,' said Roger. If one does go in for this sort of thing, it is best

to do it thoroughly. What is that fearful little cracked kettle of a bell? You that used to be so particular, and disliked the row of the children, and the loud talking, and the bad music, how can you put up with all this? You must be changed somehow since you came here.'

'I ought to be changed,' said Agnes, with a pang in her heart. Alas, how little changed she was! how the sharp little bell wore her nerves out, and the rustle of the children preparing for chapel, and the clanging of all the doors! She went with Roger to the gate, which had to be unlocked, to his suppressed derision.

'Have you to be locked in?' the irreverent youth said. 'Do they think you would all run away if you had the chance?'

Agnes took no notice of this unkind question. She herself, when she first arrived, had been a little appalled by the big mediæval key, emblem, apparently, of a very tremendous separation from the world; and she would not acknowledge that it meant no more than any innocent latch. When Roger was gone she had to hasten upstairs to get her poke-bonnet,

and rush down again to take her place among her orphans for the evening service in the chapel, which the House took pleasure in calling Evensong. She knelt down among the rustling, restless children, while the cracked bell jangled, and a funny little procession of priests and choristers came from the vestry door. They were all the most excellent people in the world, and worthy of reverence in their way; but no procession of theatrical *supers* was ever more quaintly comic than that which solemnly marched half-way round the homely little chapel of the House, chanting a hymn very much out of tune, and ending in the best of curates—a good man, worthy of any crowning, civic or sacred, who loved the poor, and whom the poor loved, but who loved the ceremonial of these comic-solemn processions almost more than the poor. With a simple, complaisant sense of what he was doing for the Church, this good man paced slowly past the kneeling figure of the young teacher, motionless in her black drapery, with her head bent down upon her hands. No mediæval Pope in full certainty of conducting the most impressive ceremonial in the world could have been more

sincerely convinced of the solemnising effect of his progress, or more simply impressed by its spiritual grandeur; and no mediæval nun, in passionate penitence over a broken vow, could have been more utterly bowed down and prostrate than poor Agnes Burchell, guilty of having been beguiled by the pleasant voice and pleasant looks of Oswald Meredith into the dawn of innocent interest in that mundane person: she, who had so short time since offered herself to God's service—she, who had made up her mind that to live an ideal life of high duty and self-sacrifice was better than the poor thing which vulgar minds called happiness. The cracked bell tinkled, and the rude choristers chanted, and all the restless children rustled about her, distracting her nerves and her attention. All this outside of devotion, she said to herself, and a heart distracted with vulgar vanities within! Was this the ideal to which she had vowed herself—the dream of a higher life? The children pulled at her black cloak in consternation, and whispered, 'Teacher, teacher!' when the service began, and she had to stumble up to her feet, and try to keep them somewhere near the time in

their singing. But her mind was too disturbed to follow the hymn, which was a very ecstatic one about the joys of Paradise. Oh, wicked, wicked Agnes! what was she doing, she asked herself—a wolf in sheep's clothing amid this angelic band?

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

This was a time of great agitation for the two houses so close to each other, with only a wall dividing the troubles of the one from the excitement of the other, and a kind of strange union between them, linking them more closely in the very attempt at disjunction. The greater part of the private commotion which was going on, as it were, underground was concealed from Cara as not a proper subject of discussion before her; but it was not necessary to take any steps of the kind with Oswald, who, in his light-hearted indifference, ignored it comfortably, and followed his own devices through the whole without giving the other affairs a thought. After all, the idea of anyone exciting him or herself over the question whether a respectable old fogey, like Mr. Beresford, should go on paying perpetual visits to a respectable matron like

his mother, touched Oswald's mind with a sense of the ludicrous which surmounted all seriousness. If they liked it, what possible harm could there be? He had not the uneasy prick of wounded feeling, the sense of profanation which moved Edward at the idea of his mother's conduct being questioned in any way. Oswald was fond of his mother, and proud of her, though he was disposed to smile at her absurd popularity and the admiration she excited among her friends. He would have thought it a great deal more natural that he himself should be the object of attraction; but, granting the curious taste of society, at which he felt disposed to laugh, it rather pleased him that *his* mother should be so popular, still admired and followed at her age. He thought, like Mr. Somnerville, that she was something of a humbug, getting up that pretence of sympathy with everybody, which it was impossible anyone in her senses could feel. But so long as it brought its reward, in the shape of so much friendliness from everybody, and gratitude for the words and smiles, which cost nothing, Oswald, at least, saw no reason to complain. And as for scandal arising about Mr. Beresford! he could not but

laugh; at their age! So he pursued his easy way as usual, serenely light-hearted, and too much occupied with his own affairs to care much for other people's. In addition to this, it must be added that Oswald was falling very deep in love. These interviews between the hospital and the House were but meagre fare to feed a passion upon; but the very slightness of the link, the oddity of the circumstances, everything about it delighted the young man, who had already gone through a great many drawing-room flirtations, and required the help of something more piquant. He was very happy while they were all so agitated and uncomfortable. Twice a week were hospital days, at which he might hope to see her; and almost every morning now he managed to cross the path of the little school procession, and, at least see her, if he did not always catch the eye of the demure little teacher in her long cloak. Sometimes she would look at him sternly, sometimes she gave him a semi-indignant, sometimes a wholly friendly glance, sometimes, he feared, did not perceive him at all. But that was not Oswald's fault. He made a point of taking off his hat, and indeed holding it in his hand a moment

longer than was necessary, by way of showing his respect, whether she showed any signs of perceiving him or not. She went softly along the vulgar pavement, with steps which he thought he could distinguish among all the others, ringing upon the stones with a little rhythm of her own, about which he immediately wrote some verses. All this he would tell to Cara, coming to her in the morning before he set out to watch the children defiling out of the House. And all the world thought, as was natural, that the subject of these talks was his love for Cara, not his love, confided to Cara, for some one else.

As for Agnes, she not only saw Oswald every time he made his appearance, whether she allowed him to know it or not, but she felt his presence in every nerve and vein, with anger for the first day or two after Roger's visit, then with a softening of all her heart towards him as she caught his reverential glance, his eager appeal to her attention. After all, whispers to Cara, whom he had known all her life—little Cara, who even to Agnes herself seemed a child —could not mean half so much as this daily haunting of her own walks, this perpetual ap-

pearance wherever she was. That was a totally different question from her own struggle not to notice him, not to think of him. The fact that it was shocking and terrible on her part to allow her mind to dwell on any man, or any man's attentions, while occupied in the work to which she had devoted herself, and filling almost the position of a consecrated Sister, was quite a different thing from the question whether he was a false and untrustworthy person, fol lowing her with the devices of vulgar pursuit, a thing too impious to think of, too humiliating. Agnes was anxious to acquit the man who admired and sought her, as well as determined to reject his admiration; and, for the moment, the first was actually the more important matter of the two. Herself she could be sure of. She had not put her hand to the plough merely to turn back. She was not going to abandon her ideal at the call of the first lover who held out his hand to her. Surely not; there could be no doubt on that subject; but that this generous, gentle young man, with those poetic sentiments which had charmed yet abashed her mind, that he should be false to his fair exterior, and mean something unlovely and untrue, instead of a

real devotion, that was too terrible to believe. Therefore, she did not altogether refuse to reply to Oswald's inquiries when the next hospital day brought about another meeting. This time he did not even pretend that the meeting was accidental, that he had been too late for making the proper inquiries in his own person, but went up to her, eagerly asking for 'our little patient,' with all the openness of a recognised acquaintance.

'Emmy is better—if you mean Emmy,' said Agnes, with great state. 'The fever is gone, and I hope she will soon be well.'

'Poor little Emmy,' said Oswald; 'but I don't want her to be well too soon—that is, it would not do to hurry her recovery. She must want a great deal of care still.'

He hoped she would smile at this, or else take it literally and reply seriously; but Agnes did neither. She walked on, with a stately air, quickening her pace slightly, but not so as to look as if she were trying to escape.

'I suppose, as the fever is gone, she has ceased to imagine herself in heaven,' said Oswald. 'Happy child! when sickness has such illusions, it is a pity to be well. We are not so well off in our commonplace life."

He thought she would have responded to the temptation and turned upon him to ask what he meant by calling life commonplace; and indeed the wish stirred Agnes so that she had to quicken her pace in order to resist the bait thus offered. She said nothing, however, to Oswald's great discomfiture, who felt that nothing was so bad as silence, and did not know how to overcome the blank, which had more effect on his lively temperament than any amount of disapproval and opposition. But he made another valorous effort before he would complain.

'Yours, however, is not a commonplace life,' he said. 'We worldlings pay for our ease by the sense that we are living more or less ignobly, but it must be very different with you who are doing good always. Only, forgive me, is there not a want of a little pleasure, a little colour, a little brightness? The world is so beautiful,' said Oswald, his voice slightly faltering, not so much from feeling, as from fear that he might be venturing on dubious ground. 'And *we* are so young.'

That pronoun, so softly said, with such a tender emphasis and meaning, so much more

than was ever put into two letters before, went to the heart of Agnes. She was trying so hard to be angry with him, trying to shut herself against the insinuating tone of his voice, and those attempts to beguile her into conversation. All the theoretical fervour that was in her mind had been boiling up to reply, and perhaps her resolution would not have been strong enough to restrain her, had not that *we* come in, taking the words from her lips and the strength from her mind. She could neither protest against the wickedness and weakness of consenting to live an ignoble life, nor indignantly declare that there was already more than pleasure, happiness, and delight in the path of self-sacrifice, when all the force was stolen out of her by that tiny monosyllable—*we*! How dared he identify himself with her? draw her into union with him by that little melting yet binding word? She went on faster than ever in the agitation of her thoughts, and was scarcely conscious that she made him no answer; though surely what he had said called for some reply.

Oswald was at his wit's end. He did not know what to say more. He made a little pause for some answer, and then getting none,

suddenly changed his tone into one of pathetic appeal. 'Are you angry with me?' he said. 'What have I done? Don't you mean to speak to me any more?'

'Yes,' she said, turning suddenly round, so that he could not tell which of his questions she was answering. 'I am vexed that you will come with me. Gentlemen do not insist on walking with ladies to whom they have not been introduced—whom they have met only by chance——'

He stopped short suddenly, moved by the accusation; but unfortunately Agnes too, startled by his start, stopped also, and gave him a curious, half-defiant, half-appealing look, as if asking what he was going to do; and this look took away all the irritation which her words had produced. He proceeded to excuse himself, walking on, but at a slower pace, compelling her to wait for him—for it did not occur to Agnes, though she had protested against his company, to take the remedy into her own hands, and be so rude as to break away.

'What could I do?' he said piteously. 'You would not tell me even your name—you know mine. I don't know how to address you, nor

how to seek acquaintance in all the proper forms. It is no fault of mine.'

This confused Agnes by a dialectic artifice for which she was not prepared. He gave a very plausible reason, not for the direct accusation against him, but for a lesser collateral fault. She had to pause for a moment before she could see her way out of the maze. 'I did not mean that. I meant you should not come at all,' she said.

'Ah! you cannot surely be so hard upon me,' cried Oswald, in real terror, for it had not occurred to him that she would, in cold blood, send him away. 'Don't banish me!' he cried. 'Tell me what I am to do for the introduction—where am I to go? I will do anything. Is it my fault that I did not know you till that day?—till that good child, bless her, broke her leg. I shall always be grateful to poor little Emmy. She shall have a crutch of gold if she likes. She shall never want anything I can give her. Do you think I don't feel the want of that formula of an introduction? With that I should be happy. I should be able to see you at other times than hospital days, in other places than the streets. The streets are beautiful ever since

I knew you,' cried the young man, warming with his own words, which made him feel the whole situation much more forcibly than before, and moved him at least, whether they moved her or not.

'Oh!' cried Agnes, in distress, 'you must not talk to me so. You must not come with me, Mr. Meredith; is not my dress enough——'

'There now!' he said, 'see what a disadvantage I am under. I dare not call you Agnes, which is the only sweet name I know. And your dress! You told me yourself you were not a Sister."

'It is quite true,' she said, looking at him, trying another experiment. 'I am a poor teacher, quite out of your sphere.'

'But then, fortunately, I am not poor,' said Oswald, almost gaily, in sudden triumph. 'Only tell me where your people are, where I am to go for that introduction. I thank thee, Lady Agnes, Princess Agnes, for teaching me that word. I will get my introduction or die.'

'Oh, here we are at the House!' she cried suddenly, in a low tone of horror, and darted away from him up the steps to the open door. Sister Mary Jane was standing there unsus-

picious, but visibly surprised. She had just parted with some one, whom poor Agnes, in her terror, ran against; for in the warmth of the discussion they had come up to the very gate of the House, the entrance to that sanctuary where lovers where unknown. Sister Mary Jane opened a pair of large blue eyes, which Oswald (being full of admiration for all things that were admirable) had already noted, and gazed at him, bewildered, letting Agnes pass without comment. He took off his hat with his most winning look of admiring respectfulness as he went on—no harm in winning over Sister Mary Jane, who was a fair and comely Sister, though no longer young. Would Agnes, he wondered, have the worldly wisdom to make out that he was an old acquaintance, or would she confess the truth? Would Sister Mary Jane prove a dragon, or, softened by her own beauty and the recollection of past homages, excuse the culprit? Oswald knew very well that anyhow, while he walked off unblamed and unblamable, the girl who had been only passive, and guilty of no more than the mildest indiscretion, would have to suffer more or less. This, however, did not move him to any regret for having compromised her.

It rather amused him, and seemed to give him a hold over her. She could not take such high ground now and order him away. She was in the same boat, so to speak. Next time they met she would have something to tell which he would almost have a right to know. It was the establishing of confidence between them. Oswald did not reckon at a very serious rate the suffering that might arise from Sister Mary Jane's rebuke. 'They have no thumbscrews in those new convents, and they don't build girls up in holes in the walls now-a-days,' he said to himself, and, on the whole, the incident was less likely to end in harm than in good.

Agnes did not think so, who rushed in—not to her room, which would have been a little comfort, but to the curtained corner of the dormitory, from which she superintended night and day 'the middle girls,' who were her charge, and where she was always afraid of some small pair of peeping eyes prying upon her seclusion. She threw off her bonnet, and flung herself on her knees by the side of her little bed. 'Oh, what a farce it was,' she thought, to cover such feelings as surged in her heart under the demure drapery of that black

cloak, or to tie the conventual bonnet over cheeks that burned with blushes, called there by such words as she had been hearing! She bent down her face upon the coverlet and cried as if her heart would break, praying for forgiveness, though these same foolish words would run in and out of her prayers, mixing with her heart-broken expressions of penitence in the most bewildering medley. After all, there was no such dreadful harm done. She was not a Sister, nor had she ever intended to be a Sister, but that very simple reflection afforded the fanciful girl no comfort. She had come here to seek a higher life, and lo, at once, at the first tempation, had fallen—fallen, into what? Into the foolishness of the foolishest girl without an ideal—she whose whole soul had longed to lay hold on the ideal, to get into some higher atmosphere, on some loftier level of existence It was not Sister Mary Jane she was afraid of, it was herself whom she had so offended; for already, could it be possible? insidious traitors in her heart had begun to ply her with suggestions of other kinds of perfection; wicked lines of poetry stole into her head, foolish stories came to her recollection. Oh! even praying,

even penitence were not enough to keep out this strife. She sprang to her feet, and rushed to St. Cecilia, the room which was her battle-ground, and where the noise of the girls putting away their books and work, and preparing to go to tea, promised her exemption, for a little while at least, from any possibility of thought. But Agnes was not to be let off so easily. In the passage she met Sister Mary Jane. 'I was just going to send for you,' said the Sister, benign but serious. 'Come to my room, Agnes. Sister Sarah Ann will take the children to tea.'

Agnes followed, with her heart, she thought, standing still. But it would be a relief to be scolded, to be delivered from the demon of self-reproach in her own bosom. Sister Mary Jane seated herself at a table covered with school-books and account-books, in the little bare room, laid with matting, which was all the House afforded for the comfort of its rulers. She pointed to a low seat which all the elder girls knew well, which was the stool of repentance for the community. 'My dear,' said Sister Mary Jane, 'did you know that gentleman in the world? Tell me truly, Agnes. You are only an associate: you are not under

our rule, and there is no harm in speaking to an acquaintance. But so long as anyone wears our dress there must be a certain amount of care. Did you know him, my dear, tell me, in the world?'

Agnes could not meet these serious eyes. Her head drooped upon her breast. She began to cry. 'I do not think it was my fault. Oh, I have been wrong, but I did not mean it. It was not my fault.'

'That is not an answer, my dear,' said Sister Mary Jane.

And then the whole story came rushing forth with sobs and excuses and self-accusations all in one. 'It is the badness in my heart. I want to be above the world, but I cannot. Things come into my mind that I don't want to think. I would rather, far rather, be devoted to my work, and think of nothing else, like you, Sister Mary Jane. And then I get tempted to talk, to give my opinion. I was always fond of conversation. Tell me what to do to keep my course straight, to be like you. Oh, if I could keep steady and think only of one thing! It is my thoughts that run off in every direction: it is not this gentleman. Oh, what can one do when one's heart is so wrong!'

Sister Mary Jane listened with a smile. Oswald's confidence in her beautiful eyes was perhaps not misplaced. And probably she was conscious now and then of thinking of something else as much as her penitent. She said, 'My dear, I don't think you have a vocation. I never thought it. A girl may be a very good girl and not have a vocation. So you need not be very unhappy if your thoughts wander; all of us have not the same gifts. But, Agnes, even if you were in the world, instead of being in this house, which should make you more careful, you would not let a gentleman talk to you whom you did not know. You must not do it again.'

'It was not meant badly,' said Agnes, veering to self-defence. 'He wanted to know how little Emmy was. It was the gentleman who carried her to the hospital. It was kindness; it was not meant for——'

'Yes, I saw who it was. And I can understand how it came about. But it is so easy to let an acquaintance spring up, and so difficult to end it when it has taken root. Perhaps, my dear, you had better not go to little Emmy again.'

'Oh!' Agnes gave a cry of remonstrance and protest. It did not hurt her to be told not to speak to him any more—but not to go to little Emmy! She was not sure herself that it was all for little Emmy's sake, and this made her still more unhappy, but not willing to relinquish the expedition. Sister Mary Jane, however, took no notice of the cry. She put a heap of exercises into Agnes's hands to be corrected. 'They must all be done to-night,' she said, calculating with benevolent severity that this would occupy all the available time till bedtime. 'One nail drives out another,' she said to herself, being an accomplished person, with strange tongues at her command. And thus she sent the culprit away, exhausted with tears and supplied with work. 'I will send you some tea to St. Monica, where you can be quiet,' she said. And there Agnes toiled all the evening over her exercises, and had not a moment to spare. 'Occupation, occupation,' said the Sister to herself; 'that is the only thing. She will do very well if she has no time to think.'

But was that the ideal life? I doubt if Sister Mary Jane thought so; but she was

old enough to understand the need of such props, which Agnes was still young enough to have indignantly repudiated. For her part, Agnes felt that a little more thought would save her. If she could get vain imaginations out of her head, and those scraps of poetry, and bits of foolish novels, and replace them with real thought—thought upon serious subjects, something worthy the name—how soon would all those confusing, tantalizing shadows flee away! But, in the meantime, it is undeniable that the girl left this interview with a sense of relief, such as, it is to be supposed, is one of the chief reasons why confession continues to hold its place, named or nameless, in all religious communions more or less. Sister Mary Jane was not the spiritual director of the community, though I think the place would have very well become her; but it was undeniable that the mind of Agnes was lightened after she had poured forth her burdens; also that her sin did not look quite so heinous as it had done before; also that the despair which had enveloped her, and of which the consciousness that she must never so sin again formed no inconsiderable part, was imperceptibly dis-

pelled, and the future as well as the past made less gloomy. Perhaps, if any very searching inspection had been made into those recesses of her soul which were but imperfectly known to Agnes herself, it might have been read there that there was no longer any crushing weight of certainty as to the absolute cessation of the sin; but that was beyond the reach of investigation. Anyhow, she had no time to think any more. Never had exercises so bad come under the young teacher's inspection; her brain reeled over the mis-spellings, the misunderstandings. Healthy human ignorance, indifference, opacity, desire to get done anyhow, could not have shown to greater advantage. They entirely carried out the intentions of Sister Mary Jane, and left her not a moment for thought, until she got to her recess in the dormitory. And then, after the whisperings were all hushed, and the lights extinguished, Agnes was too tired for anything but sleep—a result of occupation which the wise Sister was well aware of too. Indeed, everything turned out so well in the case of this young penitent, that Sister Mary Jane deemed it advisable not to interfere with the visits to the hospital. If she

surmounted temptation, why, then she was safe; if not, other steps must be taken. Anyhow, it was well that her highly-wrought feelings and desire of excellence should be put to the test; and as Agnes was not even a Postulant, but still in 'the world,' an unwise backsliding of this kind was less important. No real harm could come to her. Nevertheless, Sister Mary Jane watched her slim figure disappear along the street from her window with unusual interest. Was it mere interest in little Emmy that had made the girl so anxious to go, or was she eager to encounter the test and try her own strength? Or was there still another reason, a wish more weak, more human, more girlish? Agnes walked on very quickly, pleased to find herself at liberty. She was proud of the little patient, whose small face brightened with delight at the sight of her. And she did not like the sensation of being shut up out of danger, and saved arbitrarily from temptation. Her heart rose with determination to keep her own pure ideal path, whatever solicitations or blandishments might assail her. And indeed, to Agnes, as to a knight of romance, it is not to be denied that 'the danger's self was lure alone.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FIRESIDE.

It is very hard to be obliged to alter our relationships with our friends, and still more hard to alter the habits which have shaped our lives. Mr. Beresford, when he was forbidden to continue his visits to his neighbour, was like a man stranded, not knowing what to make of himself. When the evening came he went to his library as usual, and made an attempt to settle to his work, as he called it. But long before the hour at which with placid regularity he had been used to go to Mrs. Meredith's he got uneasy. Knowing that his happy habit was to be disturbed, he was restless and uncomfortable even before the habitual moment came. He could not read, he could not write —how was he to spend the slowly-moving moments, and how to account to her for the disturbance of the usual routine? Should he

write and tell her that he was going out, that he had received a sudden invitation or a sudden commission. When he was debating this question in his mind, Edward came in with a very grave face to say that his mother was ill and unable to see anyone.

'She said you had better be told,' said Edward; 'she has gone to her room. She has a—headache. She cannot see anyone to-night.'

'Mr. Sommerville has been with you; has he anything to do with your mother's headache?'

'I think so,' said Edward, angrily—'old meddler; but she seems to think we must put up with him. I wish my father would come home and look after his own affairs.'

'It was a mission from your father, then?' Mr. Beresford was silent for a moment, thinking with somewhat sombre dissatisfaction of the absent Meredith. Would it be so pleasant to see him come home? Would the unaccustomed presence of the master be an advantage to the house? He could not be so insincere as to echo Edward's wish; but he was moved sympathetically towards the youth, who cer-

tainly was quite unsuspicious of him, whatever other people might be. 'Go upstairs and see Cara,' he said; 'she is in the drawing-room.'

The young man's face brightened. Oswald was absent; he was not as usual in his brother's way; and though Edward had agreed loyally to accept what he supposed to be the state of affairs and school himself to look upon Cara as his future sister, that was no reason—indeed it was rather the reverse of a reason—for avoiding her now. He went upstairs with a kind of sweet unhappiness in his heart. If Cara was not for him, he must put up with it; he must try to be glad if she had chosen according to her own happiness. But in the meantime he would try to forget that, and take what pleasure heaven might afford him in her society—a modified imperfect happiness with an after-taste of bitterness in it—but still better than no consolation at all.

Cara was with her aunt in the drawing-room, and they both welcomed him with smiles. Miss Cherry, indeed, was quite effusive in her pleasure.

'Come and tell us all the news and amuse us,' she said; 'that is the chief advantage of

having men about. My brother is no good, he never goes out; and if he did go out, he never comes upstairs. I thought Oswald would have come this evening,' Miss Cherry said, in a tone which for her sounded querulous; and she looked from one to the other of the young people with a curious look. She was not pleased to be left out of Cara's confidence, and when they excused Oswald with one breath, both explaining eagerly that they had known of his engagement, Miss Cherry was if anything worse offended still. Why should not they be open, and tell everything? she thought.

'Besides,' said Cara, very calmly, 'Oswald never comes here in the evening: he has always so many places to go to, and his club. Edward is too young to have a club. Why should people go out always at night? Isn't it pleasant to stay at home?'

'My dear, gentlemen are not like us,' said Miss Cherry, instinctively defending the absent, 'and to tell the truth, when I have been going to the play, or to a party—I mean in my young days—I used to like to see the lighted streets—all the shops shining, and the people

thronging past on the pavement. I am afraid it was a vulgar taste; but I liked it. And men, who can go where they please —— I am very sorry that your mamma has a headache, Edward. She is not seeing anyone? I wonder what James ——?' Here she stopped abruptly and looked conscious, feeling that to discuss her brother with these young persons would be very foolish. Fortunately they were occupied with each other, and did not pay much attention to what she said.

'Oh, Edward,' said Cara, 'stay and read to us! There is nothing I like so much. It is always dull here in the evenings, much duller than at the Hill, except when we go out. And Aunt Cherry has her work, and so have I. Sit here—here is a comfortable chair close to the lamp. You have nothing particular to do, and if your mother has a headache, she does not want you.'

'I don't require to be coaxed,' said Edward, his face glowing with pleasure; and then a certain pallor stole over it as he said to himself, she is treating me like her brother; but even that was pleasant, after a sort. 'I am quite willing to read,' he said; 'what shall it be? Tell me what book you like best.'

'Poetry,' said Cara; 'don't you like poetry, Aunt Cherry? There is a novel there; but I prefer Tennyson. Mr. Browning is a little too hard for me. Aunt Cherry, Edward is very good when he reads out loud. You would like to hear "Elaine"?'

'Ye-es,' said Miss Cherry. She cast a regretful glance at the novel, which was fresh from Mudie's; but soon cheered up, reflecting that she was half through the second volume, and that it would not be amusing to begin it over again. 'In my young days stories would bear reading two or three times over,' she said, unconsciously following out her own thought; but they have fallen off like everything else. Yes, my dear, I am always fond of poetry. Let me get my work. It is the new kind of art-needlework, Edward. don't know if you have seen any of it. It is considered a great deal better in design than the Berlin work we used to do, and it is a very easy stitch, and goes quickly. That is what I like in it. I must have the basket with all my crewels, Cara, and my scissors and my thimble, before he begins. I hate interrupting anyone who is reading. But you are only hemming,

my dear. You might have prettier work for the drawing-room. I think girls should always have some pretty work in hand; don't you think so, Edward? It is pleasanter to look at than that plain piece of white work.'

'I should think anything that Cara worked at pretty,' said Edward, forgetting precaution. Miss Cherry looked up at him suddenly with a little alarm, but Cara, who was searching for the crewels, and the thimble and the scissors, on a distant table, fortunately did not hear what he said.

'H-hush!' said Miss Cherry; 'we must not make the child vain;' but, to tell the truth, her lively imagination immediately leaped at a rivalship between the brothers. 'I suppose we must consider her fate sealed, though she is not so frank about it as I could wish,' she added, in an under-tone.

'Here are your crewels, Aunt Cherry; and here is the book, Edward. What were you talking about?' said Cara, coming back into the warm circle of the light.

'Nothing, my darling — about the art needlework, and Edward thinks it very pretty; but I am not sure that I don't prefer the Berlin

wool. After all, to work borders to dusters seems scarcely worth while, does it? Oh yes, my dear, I know, it is for a chair; but it looks just like a duster. Now we used to work on silk and satin—much better worth it.'

'Aunt Cherry, you always talk most when someone is beginning to read.'

'Do I, dear?' said Miss Cherry, in a wondering, injured tone. 'Well, then, I shall be silent. I do not think I am much given to be talkative. Have I got everything?—then, my dear boy, please go on.'

It was a pretty scene. The rich warm centre of the fire, the moon-lamps on either table, filled the soft atmosphere with light. Miss Cherry, in her grey gown, which was of glistening silk, full of soft reflections, in the evening, sat on one side, with her crewels in her lap, giving points of subdued colour, and her face full in the light, very intent over the work, which sometimes puzzled her a little. Cara and Edward had the other table between them; he with his book before him, placed so that he could see her when he raised his eyes; she with the muslin she was hemming falling about her pretty hands—a fair white creature,

with a rose-light shed upon her from the fire. The rest of the room was less light, enshrining this spot of brightness, but giving forth chance gleams in every corner from mirrors which threw them forth dimly, from china and old Venetian glass, which caught the light, and sent flickers of colour about the walls. Mr. Beresford, who, deprived of his usual rest, was wandering about, an *âme en peine*, looked in for a moment at the door, and paused to look at them, and then disappeared again. He never spent a moment longer than he could help in that haunted room; but to-night, perhaps, in his restlessness, might have found it a relief to take his natural place there, had he not been checked by the quiet home-like aspect of this pretty group, which seemed complete. It did not look like any chance combination, but seemed so harmonious, so natural to the place, as if it had always been there, and always must possess the warm fireside, that he was incapable of disturbing them. Better to bear the new life alone. This genial party—what had he to do with it, disturbing it by his past, by the ghosts that would come with him? He shut the door noiselessly, and went back

again, down to his gloomy library. Poor Annie's room, in which everything spoke of her—how the loss of her had changed all the world to him, and driven him away for ever from the soft delight of that household centre! Strangely enough, the failure of the refuge which friendship had made for him, renewed all his regrets tenfold for his wife whom he had lost. He seemed almost to lose her again, and the bitterness of the first hours came back upon him as he sat alone, having nowhere to go to. Life was hard on him, and fate.

The party in the drawing-room had not perceived this ghost looking in upon them: they went on tranquilly; Miss Cherry puckering her soft old forehead over her art design, and the firelight throwing its warm ruddiness over Cara's white dress. Barring the troubles incident upon art-needlework, the two ladies were giving their whole minds to the lily maid of Astolat and her love-tragedy. But the reader was not so much absorbed in 'Elaine.' Another current of thought kept flowing through his mind underneath the poetry. He wondered whether this would be his lot through his life, to sit in the light of the warmth which was for

his brother, and be the tame spectator of the love which was his brother's, and make up for the absence of the gay truant who even for that love's sake would not give up his own pleasures. Edward felt that there would be a certain happiness touched with bitterness even in this lot; but how strange that this, which he would have given his life for, should fall to Oswald's share, who would give so little for it, and not to him! These thoughts ran through his mind like a cold undercurrent below the warm sunlit surface of the visible stream; but they did not show, and indeed they did not much disturb Edward's happiness of the moment, but gave it a kind of poignant thrill of feeling, which made it more dear. He knew (he thought) that Oswald was the favoured and chosen, but as yet he had not been told of it, and the uncertainty was still sweet, so long as it might last.

'Ah!' said Cara, drawing a long breath: the poetry had got into her head—tears were coming into her eyes, filling them and then ebbing back again somehow, for she would not shed them. She had no thought but for 'Elaine,' yet felt somehow, as youth has a way of doing, a soft comparison between herself and Elaine, a

wavering of identity—was it that she too was capable of that 'love of the moth for the star?' Edward watching her, felt that there was more poetry in Cara's blue eyes than in the Laureate; and no shame to Mr. Tennyson. Is it not in that tender emotion, that swelling of the heart to all lofty and sorrowful, and beautiful things, that poetry takes its rise? Cara being truly the poet's vision, even to her own touched and melting consciousness, was all Elaine in her young lover's eyes.

'But, my dear, my dear!' said Miss Cherry, 'if poor Elaine had only loved someone like herself, some young knight that could respond to her and make her happy, oh, how much better it would have been! It makes my heart ache: for Lancelot, you know, never could have loved her; though indeed I don't know why not, for men being middle-aged is no guarantee, Miss Cherry added, with a little sigh, 'against their making fools of themselves for young girls; but it would have been far more natural and happier for her had she set her heart on someone of her own age, who would have made her——'

'Oh,' cried Cara, 'don't say it over again!

made her happy! did Elaine want to be made happy? She wanted what was the highest and noblest, not asking what was to become of her. What did it matter about her? It was enough that she found out Lancelot without even knowing his name. I suppose such a thing might be,' said Cara, sinking her voice in poetic awe, 'as that Lancelot might come to one's very door, and one never know him. That would be worse, far worse, than dying for his sake.'

'Oh, Cara, Lancelot was not such a very fine character after all,' said Miss Cherry, 'and though I am not so clever about poetry as you are, I have seen many a young girl taken in with an older man, who seemed everything that was noble, but had a very sad past behind him that nobody knew of; but after they are married, it is always found out. I would rather, far rather, see *you* with a young man of your own age.'

'Aunt Cherry!' cried the girl, blushing all over with the hot, sudden, overwhelming blush of her years, and then Cara threw a glance at Edward, seeking sympathy and implying horror at this matter-of-fact view, and caught his eye and blushed all the more; while Edward blushed

too, he knew not why. This glance of mutual understanding silenced them both, though neither knew what electric spark had passed between them. Cara in her confusion edged her chair a little further off, and Edward returned to his book. It was an interruption to the delicious calm of the evening. And Miss Cherry began to look at her watch and wonder audibly to find that it was so late. 'Past ten o'clock! almost time for bed. I thought it was only about eight. Are you really going, Edward? I am sure we are very much obliged —the evening has passed so quickly. And I hope your mamma will be better to-morrow. Tell her how very very sorry we are, and give her my love.'

Edward went away with his heart beating loud. To think that the rightful enjoyment of all this belonged not to himself, but to Oswald, who was out dining, perhaps flirting somewhere, caring so little about it. Was it always so in this world—what a man most wanted he never got, but that which he prized little was flung to him like a crust to a dog? How strange it was! Edward did not go in, but lit a pensive cigar, and paced up and down the Square, watching

the lights rise into the higher windows. He knew which was Cara's, and watched the lighting of the candles on the table, which he could guess by the faint brightening which showed outside. What was she thinking of? Perhaps of Oswald, wondering why he had not come ; perhaps kindly of himself as of a brother, in whose affection she would trust. Yes ! said Edward to himself, with pathetic enthusiasm ; she should always be able to trust in his affection. If Oswald proved but a cool lover, a cooler husband, Edward would never fail her as a brother. She should never find out that any other thought had ever entered his mind. She should learn that he was always at her command, faithful to any wish of hers ; but then he recollected, poor fellow, that he was going to India, in Oswald's place, who would not go. How could he serve her—how could he be of use to her then ?

Miss Cherry lingered a little after she had sent Cara to bed. She wanted to look over the end of that novel, and the fire was too good to be left, John having imprudently heaped on coals at a late hour. Before she opened the book she paused to think that if it had not been

Oswald, she almost wished that it had been Edward; but it was Cara, of course, who must choose. She had not read much more than a page, however, when her studies were disturbed. Her brother came suddenly into the room, in his slippers, a carelessness of toilette which was quite unusual to him. He came in making her start, and poked the fire with a sort of violence without saying anything. Then he turned his back to the mantelpiece, and gave a glance round the room, in all its dim perfections, and sighed.

'Cherry,' he said, 'if you are not busy, I should like to ask you a question. I came upstairs a little while ago, but you were too much occupied to notice me.'

'James! indeed, I never saw you.'

'I know you did not. I did not mean to blame anyone. Tell me what you meant the other morning, when you advised me to stay at home after dinner—not to leave Cara? Was it for Cara's sake?'

'Cara was lonely, James; she has never—been used—to be left alone.'

'Was it for Cara's sake?'

'Oh, James,' said Miss Cherry, faltering, 'don't think I wish to interfere! You are more

able to judge than I am. It is not my place to make any remarks upon what you do.'

'Cherry, don't evade the question; why did you speak to me so? Was it entirely for Cara's sake?'

Miss Cherry grew red and grew white. She clasped her hands together in unconscious supplication. 'I must say what I think if I say anything, James. It was a little for—dear Mrs. Meredith too. One must think of her as well. Her husband is a long way off; she is a very kind woman—kindness itself. Even if she thought you came too often, she would not like to say anything. Women understand women, James. She would say to herself, that to send you away would hurt your feelings, and she would rather bear a little annoyance herself.'

'Do you mean to say she has had any annoyance on my account?'

'She might have, James dear. She has not taken me into her confidence; but people talk. I suppose if she was a widow and you could—marry——'

'Charity!'

'He had scarcely ever called her by that formal name before, and Miss Cherry was fright-

ened. 'Oh!' she cried, once more clasping her hands. 'Do not punish me for it! It is not my fault. I know better, for I know you both; but people will say so; and you should deny yourself for her sake.'

'Does *she* wish it?' he said hoarsely. It took him a strenuous effort to keep down his fury; but indeed there was no one to assail.

'She would not wish anything for herself; it would be her nature to think of you first,' said Miss Cherry. 'It is not what she wishes, but what you, me, everybody, ought to wish for her, James.'

He looked round the room with a cloud upon his face. 'Do you know what I see here?' he said;—'my past life, which I cannot recall. Am I to come here disturbing the new life that is beginning in it—filling the place with gloom. That does not matter, does it? Better to think of a few malicious words, and make them the rule of one's conduct, than strive to follow nature and common sense.'

'James!' said Miss Cherry, 'all the malicious words in the world will do no harm to *you!*'

'What do you mean?' he said.

'You are free, so far as that is concerned,' said his timid sister, rising from her seat. She looked at him with a mild contempt, strange to be seen in the eyes of so gentle a woman. 'You can do what you like, James; it is not *you* who will suffer. Good-night,' she said.

And though Miss Cherry's heart beat loudly, she had the courage to go away and leave him there, transfixed with that bold dart thrown by her most timid, faltering hand. He stood still for some time after she had left him, unable to move with pain and astonishment. The ass of Balaam was nothing to this tremendous *coup* from Miss Cherry. He was struck prostrate. Almost he forgot to think of the room and its recollections, so entirely was he slain by this blow.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE OLD FOLK AND THE YOUNG.

The intercourse between the two houses went on for some time in that uncomfortable and embarrassing way which comes between the sudden pause of a domestic crisis and the inevitable but delayed explanation. The evening after that on which Mrs. Meredith had a headache, Mr. Beresford had an engagement. Next night she went to the opera, which had just re-opened; the next again he had a meeting of his Society; and thus they continued, avoiding the meeting at which something would require to be said, and suffering intensely each with a sense of unkindness on the part of the other. James Beresford could not but feel that to cut him off thus, demonstrated a coolness of interest on the part of his friend which went against all those shows of kindness which made her so beloved—those soft ministrations of sympathy which, he sup-

posed bitterly, anybody might have for the asking, but which were withdrawn as easily as they were given; while she, on her part, with a certain wondering resentment, felt his tame withdrawal from her, and uncourageous yielding of her friendship to the first suggestion of conventional fault-finding. But this could not go on for ever between two people of honest feeling. There came a time when he could not bear it, and she could not bear it. Mr. Beresford's return to the house which he had visited daily for so long attracted naturally as much observation as the cessation of his visits had done. While these visits were habitual there might be private smiles and comments; but the sudden stoppage of them naturally aroused all the dormant criticism; and when, after a ten days' interval, he knocked at Mrs. Meredith's door again, all her servants and his own, and the houses next door on each side, were in a ferment of curiosity. What was going to happen? He walked upstairs into the drawing-room, with his elderly heart beating a little quicker than usual. Hearts of fifty are more apt to palpitate in such cases as this than in any other. James Beresford was not in love with his neighbour's wife,

but he had found in her that tender friendship, that healing sympathy which men and women can afford to each other, better, perhaps, than men can to men, or women to women—a friendship which is the most enduring charm of marriage, but not necessarily confined to it; which is the highest delight of fraternal intercourse, yet not always to be found in that. The loss of it without fault on either side makes one of those rents in life which are as bad as death itself, even when accompanied by full understanding, on both sides, of the reason for the separation; and very rarely can these reasons be accepted and acknowledged on both sides alike, without pangs of injury or development of other and less blameless sentiments. Vulgar opinion with one unanimous voice has stigmatised the relationship as impossible; from which it may be conceded that it is dangerous and difficult; but yet solitary examples of it are to be found all over the world; occurring here and there with delicate rarity like a fastidious flower which only some quintessence of soil can suit; and it flourishes most, as is natural, among those to whom the ordinary relationships of life have not been satisfactory. Beresford, bereft half-way on the hard

road of existence of his natural companion, and Mrs. Meredith deserted by hers, were, of all people in the world, the two most likely to find some compensation in such a friendship; but I do not say it is a thing to be permitted or encouraged, because here were two for whom it was a kind of secondary happiness. They were as safe from falling into the sin which neither of them were the least inclined to, as if they had been two rocks or towers; but others might not be so safe; and social laws must, so long as the world lasts under its present conditions, be made for vulgar minds. Perhaps, too, Cara would have occupied a different place as her mother's representative had not her father found a confidant and companion of his own age, who was so much to him; and the boys might have found their mother more exclusively their own, had not so confidential a counsellor been next door. But it is doubtful whether in the latter particular there was anything to be regretted, for boys must go out into the world, according to the same vulgar voice of general opinion, and have nothing to do with their mother's apron-string. Still it was not a thing to be permitted, that those two should be such friends; and now at

last the world's will had been fully signified to them; and after an attempt to elude the necessity of explanation, the moment had come at which they must obey the fiat of society, and meet to part.

He walked into the room, his heart thumping with a muffled sound against his bosom—not like the heart-beats of young emotion—heavier, less rapid, painful throbs. She was seated in her usual place by the fire, a little table beside her with a lamp upon it, and some books. She had her knitting in her hand. She did not rise to receive him, but raised her eyes in all the old friendly sweetness, and held out her hand. She was agitated too, but she had more command over herself. There are cases in which a man may, and a woman must not, show emotion.

'Well?' she said, in a voice with a falter in it, taking no notice of his absence, or of any reason why they should not meet. 'Well?' half a question, half a salutation, betraying only in its brevity that she was not sufficiently at her ease for many words.

He went up and stood before her, putting out his hands to the fire with that want of

warmth which all unhappy people feel. He could not smile or take no notice as she tried to do. 'I have come to ask you what is the meaning of this?' he said; 'and whether there is no resource. If it must be——'

'The meaning of—what?' she said, faltering; then again a pause: 'I have nothing to do with it, Mr. Beresford; I do not understand it. These people speak a strange language.'

'Don't they?' he cried; 'a vile language, made for other ears than yours. Are we to be ruled by it, you and I, to whom it is a jargon of the lower world? '

She did not make any answer; her fingers trembled over her knitting, but she went on with it. That he should speak so, gave her a little consolation; but she knew very well, as perhaps he also knew, that there was nothing for it but to yield.

'What harm can I do you?' he said, with a kind of aimless argument. 'I am not a man to harm people by the mere sight of me, am I? I am not new and untried, like a stranger whom people might be doubtful of. All my antecedents are known. What harm can I do you? or the boys—perhaps they think I will harm the boys.'

'Oh, do not talk so,' she said; 'you know no one thinks of harm in you. It is because everything that is unusual must be wrong; because—but why should we discuss it, when there is no reason in it?'

'Why should we obey it, when there is no reason in it?' he said.

'Alas! we cannot help ourselves now; when a thing is said, it cannot be unsaid. After this we could not be the same. We should remember, and be conscious.'

'Of what?'

'Oh, of—nothing, except what has been said. Don't be angry with me. I have so many things to think of—the boys first of all; there must be no talking for them to hear. 'Don't you think,' she said, with tears in her eyes, which glistened and betrayed themselves, yet with an appealing smile, 'that least said is soonest mended? To discuss it all is impossible. If you could come—now and then—as other people come.'

Then there was a pause. To come down to the level of other people—to confess that their intercourse must be so restricted—was not that of itself a confession that the intercourse

was dangerous, impossible, even wrong? 'Other people!' Mr. Beresford repeated, in a low tone of melancholy mockery, with a resenting smile. If it had come to that, indeed!—and then he stood with his head bent down, holding his hands to the fire. She was silent, too: what could they say to each other? So many times they had sat in this room in tranquil companionship, sometimes talking, sometimes silent, no bond of politeness upon them to do one thing or the other, understanding each other. And now all at once this comradeship, this brotherhood (are all these nouns of alliance masculine?) had to be dropped, and these two friends become as other people. Not a word was said now—that was the tolling of the dead bell.

'I think I shall go away,' he said, after a pause. 'Life has not so much in it now-a-days, that it can have the best half rent off, and yet go on all the same. I think I shall go away.'

'Where will you go to?' she asked softly.

'What do I care?' he said, and then there was another long pause.

All this time, on the other side of the wall, by the fire which corresponded like one twin to another with this, Edward was reading to Cara

and Miss Cherry. There is no time in his life in which a young man is so utterly domestic, so content with the little circle of the fireside, as when he is in love. All the amusements and excitements of life were as nothing to Edward in comparison with the limited patch of light in which Miss Cherry and her niece did their needlework. He was very unhappy, poor young fellow; but how sweet it was to be so unhappy! He thought of all that Oswald was relinquishing, with a sense of semi-contempt for Oswald. Nothing would he have done against his brother's interests, however his own were involved; but he could not help the rising sense that in this case at least it was he who was worthy rather than his brother. And it was a never-ceasing wonder to him that Cara took it so placidly. Oswald went to her in the morning and held long conversations with her, but in the evening he pursued his ordinary course, and in the present disorganised state of the two houses all the mutual dinners and evening meetings being made an end of, they scarcely saw each other except in the morning. This, however, the girl seemed to accept as the natural course of affairs. She was not gay, for

it was not Cara's habit to be gay ; but she went seriously about her little world, and smiled upon Edward with absolute composure as if Oswald had no existence. It was a thing which Edward could not understand. He sat at the other side of the table and read to her, whatever she chose to place before him, as long as she chose. He was never weary ; but he did not derive much intellectual advantage from what he read. While he was giving forth some one else's sentiments, his own thoughts were running on a lively under-current. Why was Oswald never here ? and why did Cara take his absence so quietly ? These were the two leading thoughts with which he perplexed himself ; and as he never made out any sort of answer to them, the question ran on for ever. That evening on which Mr. Beresford had gone to have his parting interview with Mrs. Meredith, Miss Cherry was more preoccupied than usual. She sighed over her crewels with more heaviness than could be involved in the mere difficulties of the pattern. To be sure, there was enough in that pattern to have driven any woman out of her senses. And as she puckered her brows over it, Miss Cherry sighed ; but this sigh told

of a something more heavy which lay upon her mind, the distracted state of which may be best described by the fact that when they were in the middle of their reading, Cara hemming on with a countenance absorbed, Miss Cherry made the communication of which she was full, all at once, without warning, breaking in, in the the middle of a sentence, so that Edward's voice mingled with hers for a line or so, before he could stop himself—

'Your papa is thinking of going away.'

'What?' cried Cara and Edward in a breath.

'Your papa,' said Miss Cherry, with another great sigh, 'is thinking of shutting up his house again, and going away.'

'Aunt Cherry!' cried Cara, with the colour rushing suddenly to her face as it had a way of doing when she was moved: and she half-turned and cast a glance at Edward of wonder and sudden dismay. As for him, he had not leisure to feel the strange delight of this confidential glance, so entirely struck dumb was he with the appalling news. He grew pale as Cara grew red, and felt as if all the blood was ebbing out of his heart.

'It is not that we will not be happy—oh! happy beyond measure—to have you again, my darling,' said Miss Cherry; 'but I would be false if I did not say what a disappointment it is to think, after all our hopes for my poor James, that he is not able to settle down in his own house. I can't tell you what a disappointment it is. So far as we are concerned—Aunt Charity and I—it will be new life to us to have you home. But we did not wish to be selfish, to think of our own comfort, and it will be such a shock to dear Aunt Charity. She always said, as you know, Cara, what a comfort it was to think that the only man of the family was at hand, whatever happened. I don't know how I am to break it to her, and in her weak state of health.'

'But, Aunt Cherry—what does it mean? —What has made him change?—Are you sure you are not mistaken? Don't you think you have misunderstood? It does not seem possible. Are you quite, quite certain?'

'I am not so silly as you think me, my dear,' said Miss Cherry, half offended. 'I know the meaning of words. Yes, there are reasons. He is not so happy as he thought he might be.

No, my darling, I don't think you are to blame. He does not blame you; he only says it is not possible. If you could get him to move perhaps to another house—but not here: he could not possibly stay here.'

Now it was Cara's turn to grow pale and Edward's to grow red. She looked at him again with a wondering, questioning glance, but he did not reply.

'I hope it has nothing to do with the folly of any busybody—making mischief between him and his friends,' Edward said, with indignation. 'Mr. Beresford ought to have some philosophy—he ought not to mind.'

'Ah—he might not mind for himself—but when others are concerned,' said Miss Cherry, mysteriously. 'But so it is, my dear, whether we approve or not. I meant to have gone back to poor dear Aunt Charity, but now I am to stay on to shut up the house and settle everything. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good,' she added, with a smile; 'we shall have you back again, Cara; and that will be like the spring to the flowers. We gave you up without grumbling—but it is not in nature that we should not be glad to have you back.

This gentle piece of self-congratulation was all, however, that was said. Cara had grown quite still and pale. She turned her eyes to Edward once more, and looked at him with a sort of woeful appeal that made his heart beat. 'This is dreadful news,' he said, with his voice trembling; and then, true to his brotherly generosity, added as steadily as he could, 'It will be dreadful news for poor Oswald.' Cara clasped her hands together in a kind of mute prayer.

'Do you think nothing can be done?' she said.

Now it was Miss Cherry's turn to feel a little, a very little wounded. 'You have soon forgotten your old home,' she said. 'I thought, though you might be sorry, you would be glad too—to get home.'

'It is not that,' said Cara, with tears in her voice. What a break was this of the calm happiness of the evening, the pleasure of being together, the charm of the poetry, all those 'influences of soul and sense' that had been stealing into the girl's innocent soul and transforming her unawares! No doubt she might have outlived it all and learnt to look back

upon that first shock with a smile—but nevertheless it was the first shock, and at the moment it was overwhelming. She looked at Edward again amazed, appealing to him, asking his sympathy; ought he to thrust in Oswald between them once more? Between love and honour the young man did not know what to do or say. His heart was wrung with the thought of parting, but it was not to him the same shock and unforeseen, unbelievable calamity—under which she turned appealing to earth and heaven.

'And I am going to India,' he said, with a kind of despairing smile and quivering lips.

The elder pair on the other side of the wall were not moved by these ineffable visionary pangs. They did not stand aghast at the strange thought that their happiness was being interfered with, that heaven and earth had ceased to favour them—nor did they think that everything was over and life must come to a standstill. Their feelings were less full of the rapture or anguish; yet perhaps the heavy oppression of pain that troubled them was more bitter in its way. They knew very well that life would go on just as before, and no-

thing dreadful happen. They would only miss each other—miss the kind look and kind word, and simple daily consolation and quiet confidence each in the other. Nobody else could give them that rest and mutual support which they were thus forced to give up without cause. It was a trouble much less to be understood by the common eye, and appealing a great deal less to the heart than those pangs of youth which we have all felt more or less, and can all sympathise with—but it was not a less real trouble. After the interval of silence which neither of them broke, because neither of them had anything to say, James Beresford sank upon his knees and took her hands into his—not in any attitude of sentimental devotion, but only to approach her as she sat there. They looked at each other through tears which to each half blurred the kind countenance which was the friendliest on earth. Then he kissed the hands he held one after the other. 'God bless you,' she sobbed, her tears falling upon his sleeve. Why was it? Why was it? yet it had to be. And then they parted; he going back to his gloomy library, she sitting still where he had left her in her lonely drawing-room, wiping

away the tears, few but bitter, which this unlooked-for parting had brought to her eyes. They would not complain nor resist—nor even say what the separation cost them—but the young ones would cry out to heaven and earth, sure at least of pity, and perhaps of succour. That made all the difference. While her father came in with his latch-key, and shut his door, shutting himself up with his thoughts, Cara was lifting the mute anguish of her sweet eyes to Edward, disturbing his very soul, poor fellow, with the question, whether it was only his sympathy she asked as a spectator of her misery in parting with his brother, whether it was—— When he said that about going to India, with that tremulous smile and attempt to mock at his own pain, the tears fell suddenly in a little shower, and a sob came from Cara's oppressed bosom. For whom? Such distracting tumults of excitement do not rise in the maturer being—he was almost out of himself with wonder and anxiety, and hope and dread, dismay and terror. Was it for Oswald? Was it only his sympathy she asked for—was it but a pang of sisterly pity intensified by her own suffering, that she gave to him?

The same roof, divided only by a partition, stretched over all those agitated souls, old and young. The only quite light heart it covered was that of Oswald, who came in rather late from a merry party, and lingered still later, smoking his cigar, and thinking what was the next step to be taken in his pursuit of that pretty frightened Agnes, who was no doubt suffering for his sake. It did not hurt Oswald to think that she was suffering for him—rather it brought a smile on his face, and a pleasurable sensation. He had got a hold on her which nothing else could have given him. When they met again he would have a right to inquire into it, to give her his tender sympathy. After all, a scolding from Sister Mary Jane was not very tragical suffering. On the score of that it might be permitted to him to say a great many things that otherwise he could not have said, to suggest conclusions more momentous. And he did not think Agnes would be hard to move. He believed that she would pardon him, and not take away her favour from him—rather perhaps, even in her own despite, look upon him with eyes more kind. Oswald smoked at least two cigars in her honour, wondering if

perhaps she was crying over the catastrophe of the evening, and feeling assured that there would be sweetness in her tears. He was apt to be very sure of the favour of all he cared to please, and that everything would go well with him. And as for the troubles that were under the same roof with him, he knew nothing of them, and would not have thought much had he known. He would have laughed—for of course each of these commotions had its ludicrous side, and Oswald would have made fun of them quite successfully. But they were much less important anyhow than his own preoccupations—full of which, with confidence in his heart, and a smile on his lips, he went cheerfully upstairs, past the door within which his mother lay awake in the dark, thinking over all her life, which had not been, in external circumstances, a very bright one; and that which was closed upon Edward's conflict and confusion. Neither conflict nor confusion was in the mind of Oswald as he went smiling upstairs with his candle. All was likely to turn out well for him at least, whatever might happen to the rest of the world.

CHAPTER XXX.

A REBELLIOUS HEART.

CARA was busy in the drawing-room next morning, arranging a basketful of spring flowers which had come from the Hill, when Oswald came in with his usual budget. He was light-hearted, she was very sad. Oswald was gay because of the triumph he foresaw, and Cara was doubly depressed because she felt that her depression was ungrateful to the kind aunts whom she had been so sorry to leave, though she was so unwilling to go back. Why was it that the thought of going home made her so miserable? she asked herself. Miss Cherry's delusion about Oswald, which had almost imposed upon Cara herself, had floated all away from her mind, half in laughter half in shame, when she found out that Oswald's object was to make her the confidant of his love for another girl, not to make love to her in her own person. Cara had

been ashamed of the fancy which her aunt's suggestion had put into her mind, but the *désillusion* had been a relief—and a more sympathetic confidant could not have been. She was interested in every step of the nascent romance, eager to hear all about the romantic intercourse, consisting chiefly of looks and distant salutations, which he confided to her. No suspicion that she knew who his Agnes was had crossed Cara's mind, for Agnes Burchell was just so much older than herself as to have removed her above the terms of intimacy which are so readily formed between country neighbours. It was Liddy, the third girl of the family, who was Cara's contemporary, and it was to Miss Cherry that Agnes talked when she went to the Hill. But Cara was less interested than usual to-day; her mind was occupied with her own affairs, and that future which seemed, for the moment, so dim and deprived of all the light and brightness of life. When Oswald took the basket of crocuses out of her hand, and bid her to sit down and listen to him, she complied languidly, without any of the bright curiosity and interest which were so pleasant to him. At first, however, occupied by his own tale, he did not even

notice this failure. He told her of all that had happened, of the sudden apparition of Sister Mary Jane, and the fright in which his companion had left him. Oswald told the story with a smile. It amused him as if it had happened, Cara said to herself, being in a state of mind to judge more harshly than usual, to someone else.

'But it would not be pleasant for her,' said Cara. 'I don't think she would laugh, Oswald. Even if there was nothing wrong in talking to you, she would feel as if there was when she saw the Sister. Do you think it is—quite—nice? That is a stupid word I know, but it is the one that comes easiest; quite—quite—kind——?'

'To what, Cara?'

'Get a girl into trouble like that, and walk away and smile? indeed, I don't think it is. They could not say anything to you, but they might say a great many things that would not be pleasant to her—they would say it was not —nice: they would say it was not like a lady: they would say——Oh,' said Cara, with great gravity, 'there are a great many very disagreeable things that people can say.'

'You look as if you had felt it,' said Oswald, with a laugh—'but what does it all mean?

Only that the old people cannot amuse themselves as we do—and are jealous. You may be a little tender-conscienced creature, but you don't suppose really that girls mind?'

'Not mind!' cried Cara, growing red, 'to be called unwomanly, unladylike! What should one mind then? Do you think nothing but beating us should move us? Most likely she has not slept all night for shame—and you, you are quite pleased! you laugh'

'Come, Cara, you are too hard upon me. Poor little darling! I would save her if I could from ever shedding a tear. But what does a scolding of that kind matter? She will cry I daresay—and next time we meet she will tell me about it, and laugh at herself for having cried. But I must find out who she is, and get introduced in proper form.'

'Could I go, or Aunt Cherry? I am not hard, Oswald—I would do anything for you or for her—but you should not be so unfeeling. If she is only a teacher and poor, she might get into disgrace, she might be turned away—for, after all,' said Cara, with gentle severity, 'I do not suppose she was to blame—but girls should not talk to gentlemen in the streets. Oh, yes, I know it was your fault——but, after all——

'What a little dragon!' cried Oswald. 'You! why, I should have thought you would have sympathised with a girl like yourself—that is what comes of being brought up by old maids.'

Cara gave him a look of superb yet gentle disdain. She rose up and got her flowers again, and began to arrange the golden crocus-cups among the moss which she had prepared to receive them. She had nothing to reply to such an accusation—and, to tell the truth, Oswald felt, notwithstanding his fine manly conscious superiority to old maids and prudish girls, and all the rules of old-fashioned decorum, somewhat sharply pricked by the dart of that quiet contempt.

'I recant,' he said. 'Miss Cherry would be less hard than you, my lady Cara.'

'Aunt Cherry would go if you wished it, and tell the Sister not to be angry,' said Cara. 'So would I—though perhaps I am too young. We could say that it was entirely your fault—that you *would* talk to her—that you wish to know her friends.'

'Oh, thanks, I can manage all that myself,' he said, with a mixture of amusement and

irritation. 'Remember, I talk to you in confidence, Cara. I don't want my private affairs to travel to Miss Cherry's ears, and to be the talk of all the old ladies. Well, then, I beg your pardon, I will say I am fond of old ladies if you like; but I think we can manage for ourselves without help. She is a darling, Cara—her pretty eyes light up when she says anything, and she will not stand the conventional things that everybody says any more than you will. I am lucky to have got two such clever girls—one for my friend, the other——'

'Oswald, it is so difficult to know when you are in earnest and when you are making fun. I do not feel so sure of you as I used to do. Are you only making fun of her, or are you really, truly in earnest?'

'Making fun of her! did not I tell you she had made me serious, pious even? You are a little infidel. But, Cara, look here, I am not joking now. You don't think very much of me, I know; but there is no joke in this; I am going now to try to find out who she is, and all about her, and then I shall make my mother go, or someone. I did not mean any harm in laughing. Nobody thinks seriously of such affairs;

and don't you see we have a secret between us now, we have a link—we are not like strangers. But, as for being serious—if she is not my wife in three months—— ?'

'In three months!' cried Cara, astounded by his boldness.

'In less than that. She likes me, Cara. I can see it in her pretty eyes, though she will never look at me if she can help it. You are a horrid little cold-hearted wretch and mock me, but most people do like me,' said the young man with a laugh of happy vanity in which just enough half-modesty was mingled to make it inoffensive; 'everybody I may say but you. Oh, I am serious; serious as a judge. In three months; but for heaven's sake not a word about it, not a syllable to my mother, or anyone!'

'I am not a telltale,' said Cara; 'and I am very glad to see that you can be serious sometimes,' she added with a sigh.

He looked up alarmed. The first idea, indeed, that crossed Oswald's mind was that Cara, though she had borne it so well, was now giving in a little, and feeling the bitterness of loosing *him*; which was an idea slightly

embarrassing but agreeable, for it did not occur to him in the first place as it might to some men that such an occurrence would be humbling and painful to Cara if pleasant and flattering to himself. 'What is the matter?' he asked, looking at her curiously. 'You are not so cheerful as usual.'

'Oh, Oswald!' she said, with the tears coming to her eyes. 'Papa is going away again! I don't know why. I don't even know where he is going. It appears that he cannot make himself comfortable at home as he once thought, and the house is to be shut up and I am going back to the Hill with Aunt Cherry. It is ungrateful—horribly ungrateful of me to be sorry—but I am, I cannot help it. I thought that papa would have settled and stayed at home, and now all that is over.'

'Ah!' said Oswald. 'So! I did not think it would be so serious; it is about my mother, I suppose.'

'About your mother!'

'Yes. People have interfered; they say he is not to come to see her every day as he has been in the habit of doing. It is supposed not to be liked by the governor out in India.

It is all the absurdest nonsense. The governor out in India is as indifferent as I am, Cara—you may take my word for that—and only a set of busybodies are to blame. But I am very sorry if it is going to bother you.'

Cara did not make any answer. A flush of visionary shame came over her face. What did it mean? Such questions pain the delicate half-consciousness of a girl that there are matters in the world not fit for her discussion, beyond anything that elder minds can conceive. The suggestion of these hurts her, as elder and stouter fibres are incapable of being hurt, and this all the more when the parties involved are any way connected with herself. That there could be any question of the nature of her father's regard for any woman, much less for Mrs. Meredith, a woman whom she knew and loved, cut Cara like a knife. Her very soul shrank within her. She changed the subject eagerly—

'Were you ever at the Hill, Oswald? You must come. It will soon be spring now! look at the crocuses! and in the primrose time the woods are lovely. I was almost brought up there, and I always think of it as home.'

'But I must ask some more about this—about your father. It ought to be put a stop to——'

'Oh, don't say any more,' cried Cara, hurriedly, with another blush. 'You must let me know how your own affairs go on, and what happens; and, Oswald, oh! I hope you will take care and not let *her* get into trouble about you. If she was to lose her home and her comfort or even to get scolded——'

'Getting scolded is not such a dreadful punishment, Cara.'

'But it is to a girl,' said Cara, very gravely, and she became so absorbed in the arrangement of her crocuses, setting them in the green moss, which had packed them, that he yielded to her preoccupation, being one of the persons who cannot be content without the entire attention of anyone to whom they address themselves. He did not make out how it was that he had failed with Cara on this special morning, but he felt the failure, and it annoyed him. For the first time he had lost her interest. Was it that she did not like his devotion to Agnes to go so far, that she felt the disadvantage of losing him? This idea excited

and exhilarated Oswald, who liked to be first with everybody. Poor Cara, if it was so! he was very sorry for her. If she had shown any inclination to accept him, he would have been very willing to prove to her that he had not given her up, notwithstanding his love for the other; but she would not pay any attention to his overtures, and nothing was left for him but to go away.

Cara's whole frame seemed to tingle with her blushing, her fancy fled from the subject thrust upon her attention even when excitement brought her back to it and whispered it again in her ears. Her father! Never since the scene which she had witnessed in her mother's sick room, had Cara felt a child's happy confidence in her father. She had never analysed her sentiments towards him, but there had been a half-conscious shrinking, a sense as of something unexplained that lay between them. She had gone over that scene a hundred times and a hundred to that, roused to its importance only after it was over. What had been the meaning of it? never to this day had she been quite able to make up her mind, nobody had talked to her of her mother's death. Instead of those linger-

ings upon the sad details, upon the last words, upon all the circumstances which preceded that catastrophe, which are usual in such circumstances, there had been a hush of everything, which had driven the subject back upon her mind, and made her dwell upon it doubly. Time had a little effaced the impression, but the return to the Square had brought it back again in greater force, and in those lonely hours which the girl had spent there at first, left to her own resources, many a perplexed and perplexing fancy had crowded her mind. The new life, however, which had set in later, the companionship, the gentle gaieties, the new sentiment, altogether strange and wonderful, which had arisen in her young bosom, had quietly pushed forth all painful thoughts. But now, with the pang of parting already in her heart, and the sense, so easily taken up at her years and so tragically felt, that life never could again be what it had been—a certain pang of opposition to her father had come into Cara's mind. Going away!—to break her heart and alter her life because he would not bear the associations of his home! was a man thus, after having all that was good in existence himself, to deprive others

of their happiness for the sake of his recollections? but when this further revelation fell upon his conduct, Cara's whole heart turned and shrank from her father. She could not bear the suggestion, and yet it returned to her in spite of herself. The shame of it, the wrong of it, the confused and dark ideas of suspicion and doubt which had been moving vaguely in her mind, all came together in a painful jumble. She put away her flowers, flinging away half of them in the tumult of her thoughts. It was too peaceful an occupation, and left her mind too free for discussion with herself. The girl's whole being was roused, she scarcely knew why. Love! she had never thought of it, she did not know what it meant, and Oswald, whom her aunt supposed to entertain that wonderful occult sentiment for her, certainly did not do so, but found in her only a pleasant *confidante*, a friendly sympathiser. Something prevented Cara from inquiring further, from asking herself any questions. She did not venture even to think in the recesses of her delicate bosom, that Edward Meredith was anything more to her, or she to him, than was Miss Cherry. What was the use of asking why or wherefore? She had

begun to be happy, happier certainly than she had been before; and here it was to end. The new world, so full of strange, undefined lights and reflections, was to break up like a dissolving view, and the old world to settle down again with all its old shadows. The thought brought a few hot, hasty tears to her eyes whenever it surprised her as it did now. Poor inconsistent child! She forgot how dull the Square had been when she came, how bitterly she had regretted her other home in those long dreary evenings when there was no sound in the house except the sound of the hall-door closing upon her father when he went out. Ah! upon her father as he went out! He who was old, whose life was over (for fifty is old age to seventeen), he could not tolerate the interruption of his habits, of his talk with his friend; but she in the first flush of her beginning was to be shut out from everything, banished from *her* friends without a word! And then there crept on Cara's mind a recollection of those evening scenes over the fire: Aunt Cherry bending her brows over her needlework, and Edward reading in the light of the lamp. How innocent it was; how sweet; and it was all over, and for what?

Poor little Cara's mind seemed to turn round. That sense of falsehood and insincerity even in the solid earth under one's feet, which is the most bewildering and sickening of all moral sensations, overcame her. It was for her mother's sake, because of the love he bore her, that he could not be at ease in this room, which had been so specially her mother's; all those years while he had been wandering, it was because the loss of his wife was fresh upon his mind, and the blow so bitter that he could not resume his old life; but now what was this new breaking up of his life? Not for her mother's sake, but for Mrs. Meredith's! Cara paused with her head swimming, and looked round her to see if anything was steady in the sudden whirl. What was steady? Oswald, whom everybody (she could see) supposed to be 'in love,' whatever that was, with herself, was, as she knew, 'in love,' as he called it, with somebody else. Cara did not associate her own sentiments for anyone with that feeling which Oswald expressed for Agnes, but she felt that her own position was false, as his position was false, and Mrs. Meredith's and her father's. Was there nothing in the world that was true?

The next day or two was filled with somewhat dolorous arrangements for breaking up again the scarcely-established household. Miss Cherry occupied herself with many sighs in packing away the silver, shutting up the linen, all the household treasures, and covering the furniture with pinafores. Cara's clothes were in process of packing, Cara's room was being dismantled. Mr. Beresford's well-worn portmanteaux had been brought out, and John and Cook, half pleased at the renewed leisure which began to smile upon them, half-vexed at the cessation of their importance as purveyors for and managers of their master's 'establishment,' were looking forward to the great final 'cleaning up,' which was to them the chief event of the whole. All was commotion in the house. The intercourse with the house next door had partially ceased; Oswald still came in the morning, and Edward in the evening; but there had been no communication between the ladies of the two houses since the evening when Mr. Beresford took final leave of Mrs. Meredith. To say that there were not hard thoughts of her in the minds of the Beresfords would be untrue, and yet it was impossible that anyone could

have been more innocent than she was. All that she had done was to be kind, which was her habit and nature. 'But too kind,' Miss Cherry said privately to herself, 'too kind! Men must not be too much encouraged. They should be kept in their place,' and then the good soul cried at the thought of being hard upon her neighbour. As for Cara, she never put her thoughts on the subject into words, being too much wounded by the mere suggestion. But in her mind, too, there was a sense that Mrs. Meredith must be wrong. It could not be but that she must be wrong; and they avoided each other by instinct. After poor James was gone, Miss Cherry promised herself she would call formally and bid good-bye to that elderly enchantress who had made poor James once more an exile. Nothing could exceed now her pity for 'poor James.' She forgot the darts with which she herself had slain him, and all that had been said to his discredit. He was the sufferer now, which was always enough to turn the balance of Miss Cherry's thoughts.

When things had arrived at this pitch, a sudden and extraordinary change occurred all at once in Mr. Beresford's plans. For a day no com-

munications whatever took place between No. 7 and No. 8 in the Square. Oswald did not come in the morning—which was a thing that might be accounted for; but Edward did not appear in the evening—which was more extraordinary. Miss Cherry had brought out her art-needlework, notwithstanding the forlorn air of semi-dismantling which the drawing-room had already assumed, and Cara had her hemming ready. 'It will only be for a night or two more,' said Miss Cherry, 'and we may just as well be comfortable;' but she sighed; and as for Cara, the expression of her young countenance had changed altogether to one of nervous and impatient trouble. She was pale, her eyes had a fitful glimmer. Her aunt's little ways fretted her as they had never done before. Now and then a sense of the intolerable seized upon the girl. She would not put up with the little daily contradictions to which everybody is liable. She would burst out into words of impatience altogether foreign to her usual character. She was fretted beyond her powers of endurance. But at this moment she calmed down again. She acquiesced in Miss Cherry's little speech and herself drew the chairs into

their usual places, and got the book which Edward had been reading to them. The ladies were very quiet, expecting their visitor; the fire sent forth little puffs of flame and crackles of sound, the clock ticked softly, everything else was silent. Cara fell into a muse of many fancies, more tranquil than usual, for the idea that he would not come had not entered her mind. At least they would be happy to-night. This thought lulled her into a kind of feverish tranquillity, and even kept her from rousing, as Miss Cherry did, to the sense that he had not come at his usual hour and might not be coming. 'Edward is very late,' Miss Cherry said at last. 'Was there any arrangement made, Cara, that he was not to come?'

'Arrangement? that he was not to come!'

'My dear,' said good Miss Cherry, who had been very dull for the last hour, 'you have grown so strange in your ways. I don't want to blame you, Cara; but how am I to know? Oswald comes in the morning and Edward in the evening; but how am I to know? If one has said more to you than the other, if you think more of one than the other, you never tell *me*. Cara, is it quite right, dear? I

thought you would have told me that day that Oswald came and wanted to see you alone; of course, we know what that meant; but you evaded all my questions; you never would tell me.'

'Aunt Cherry, it was because there was nothing to tell. I told you there would be nothing.'

'Then there ought to have been something, Cara. One sees what Edward feels, poor boy, and I am very sorry for him. And it is hard upon him—hard upon us all to be so treated. Young people ought to be honest in these matters. Yes, dear, it is quite true. I am not pleased. I have not been pleased ever since——'

'Aunt Cherry,' said the girl, her face crimson, her eyes full of tears, 'why do you upbraid me now—is this the moment? As if I were not unhappy enough. What does Edward feel? Does *he* too expect me to tell him of something that does not exist?'

'Poor Edward! All I can say is, that if we are unhappy, he is unhappy too, and unhappier than either you or me, for he is——. Poor boy; but he is young and he will get over it,' said Miss Cherry with a deep sigh.

'Oh, hush, hush! but tell me of him—hush!' said Cara, eagerly; 'I hear him coming up the stairs.'

There was someone certainly coming upstairs, but it was not Edward's youthful footstep, light and springy. It was a heavier and slower tread. They listened, somewhat breathless, being thus stopped in an interesting discussion, and wondered at the slow approach of these steps. At last the door opened slowly, and Mr. Beresford, with some letters in his hand, came into the room. He came quite up to them before he said anything. The envelope which he held in his hand seemed to have contained both the open letters which he carried along with it, and one of them had a black edge. He was still running his eyes over this as he entered the room.

'I think,' he said, standing with his hand upon Cara's table, at the place where Edward usually sat, 'that you had better stop your packing for the moment. An unfortunate event has happened, and I do not think now that I can go away—not so soon at least; it would be heartless, it would be unkind!'

'What is it?' cried Miss Cherry, springing

to her feet. 'Oh, James, not any bad news from the Hill?'

'No, no; nothing that concerns us. The fact is,' said Mr. Beresford, gazing into the dim depths of the mirror and avoiding their eyes, 'Mr. Meredith, the father of the boys, has just died in India. The news has come only to-day.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HOUSE OF MOURNING.

THE news which had produced so sudden and startling an effect upon the inmates of No. 7 had been known early in the morning of the same day to the inmates of No. 8. This it was which had prevented either of the young men from paying their ordinary visits; but the wonder was that no rumour should have reached at least the kitchen of Mr. Beresford's house of the sad news which had arrived next door. Probably the reason was that the servants were all fully occupied, and had no time for conversation. The news had come early, conveyed by Mr. Sommerville personally, and by post from the official head-quarters, for Mr. Meredith was a civil servant of standing and distinction. There was nothing extraordinary or terrible in it. He had been seized with one of the rapid diseases of the climate, and had succumbed like so

many other men, leaving everything behind him settled and in order. It was impossible that a well-regulated and respectable household could have been carried on with less reference to the father of the children, and nominal master of the house, than Mrs. Meredith's was; but perhaps this was one reason why his loss fell upon them all like a thunderbolt. Dead! no one had ever thought of him as a man who could die. The event brought him near them as with the rapidity of lightning. Vaguely in their minds, or at least in the wife's mind, there had been the idea of some time or other making up to him for that long separation and estrangement—how, she did not inquire, and when, she rather trembled to think of, but some time. The idea of writing a kinder letter than usual to him had crossed her mind that very morning. They did not correspond much; they had mutually found each other incompatible, unsuitable, and lately Mrs. Meredith had been angry with the distant husband, who had been represented as disapproving of her. But this morning, no later, some thrill of more kindly feeling had moved her. She had realised all at once that it might be hard for him to be alone in the

world, and without that solace of the boys, which from indifference, or from compunction, he had permitted her to have without interference all these years. She had thought that after all it was cruel, after such a long time, to deny him a share in his own children, and she had resolved, being in a serious mood and agitated state of mind, to make the sacrifice, or to attempt to make the sacrifice more freely, and to write to him to express her gratitude to him for leaving her both the boys so long; had not he a right to them no less than hers?—in the eye of nature no less, and in the eye of the law more. Yet he had been generous to her, and had never disputed her possession of her children. These were the softening thoughts that had filled her mind before she came downstairs. And no sooner had she come down than the news arrived. He was dead. When those die who are the most beloved and cherished, the best and dearest, that calamity which rends life asunder and overclouds the world for us, has seldom in it the same sickening vertigo of inappropriateness which makes the soul sick when someone essentially earthly is suddenly carried away into the unseen, with which he seems to

have had nothing to do all his previous life. He! *dead*! a man so material, of the lower earth. What could dying be to him? What connection had he with the mystery and solemnity of the unseen? The vulgar and commonplace awe us more at these dread portals than the noble or great. What have they to do there? What had a man like Mr. Meredith to do there? Yet he had gone, no one knowing, and accomplished that journey which classes those who have made it, great and small, with the gods. A hundred discordant thoughts entered into his wife's mind—compunction, and wonder, and solemn trembling. Could he have known what she had been thinking that morning? Was it some dumb approach of his soul to hers which had aroused these more tender thoughts? Had he been aware of all that had gone on in her mind since the time when, she knowing of it, he had died? Nature has always an instinctive certainty, whatever philosophy may say against it, and however little religion may say in favour of it, that this sacred and mysterious event of death somehow enlarges and expands the being of those who have passed under its power. Since we lost them out of our sight, it seems so

necessary to believe that they see through us more than ever they did, and know what is passing within the hearts to which they were kindred. Why should the man, who living had concerned himself so little about what his wife did, *know* now instantaneously all about it, having died? She could not have given a reason, but she felt it to be so. The dark ocean, thousands of miles of it, what was that to an emancipated soul? He had died in India; but he was there, passing mysteriously through the doors, standing by her, 'putting things into her head,' in this corner of England. Which of us has not felt the same strange certainty? All at once the house seemed full of him, even to the children, who had scarcely known him. He was dead; passed into a world which mocks at distance, which knows nothing of fatigue. He was as God in some mysterious way, able to be everywhere, able to influence the living unconsciously, seeing, hearing them—simply because he was dead, and had become to mortal vision incapable of either seeing or hearing more.

There is nothing more usual than to rail at the dreadful and often unduly prolonged moment between death and the final ceremonial

which clears us away from cumbering the living soil any longer; but this moment is often a blessing to the survivors. In such a case as this 'the bereaved family' did not know what to do. How were they to gain that momentary respite from the common round? If the blinds were drawn down, and the house shut up, according to the usual formula, that would be purely fictitious; for of course he had been buried long ago. Edward paused with the shutter in his hand when about to close it, struck by this reflection, and Oswald gave vent to it plainly—'What's the good? he's in his grave long ago.' Mrs. Meredith had retired to her room on the receipt of the news, where her maid took her her cup of tea; and the young men sat down again, and ate their breakfast, as it were under protest, ashamed of themselves for the good appetites they had, and cutting off here and there a corner of their usual substantial meal, to prove to themselves that they were not quite without feeling. What were they to do to make the fact evident that they had just heard of their father's death, and to separate this day, which was to them as the day of his death, from other days? They were very much embarrassed to

know how they were to manage this. To abstain altogether from their usual occupations was the only thing which instinctively occurred to them. They sat down after breakfast was over, as though it had been a doubly solemn dolorous Sunday, on which they could not even go to church. Edward was doubtful even about *The Times*, and Oswald hesitated about going to his smoking-room as usual. A cigar seemed a levity when there was a death in the house. On the whole, however, it was Oswald who settled the matter most easily, for he began a copy of verses, 'To the memory of my Father,' which was a very suitable way indeed of getting through the first hours, and amusing too.

The house was very still all the morning, and then there was another subdued meal. Meals are a great thing to fall back upon when young persons of healthful appetite, not broken down by grief, feel themselves compelled to decorous appearance of mourning. By this time Oswald and Edward both felt that not to eat was an absurd way of doing honour to their dead father, and accordingly they had an excellent luncheon; though their mother still 'did not feel able,' her maid reported, to come down.

After this the two young men went out together to take a walk. This, too, was a kind of solemn Sabbatical exercise, which they had not taken in the same way since they were boys at school together. When they met any acquaintance, one of them would bow formally, or stretch out a hand to be shaken, passing on, too grave for talk, while the other paused to explain the 'bad news' they had received. When it was a friend of Oswald's, Edward did this, and when it was Edward's friend, Oswald did it. This little innocent solemn pantomime was so natural and instinctive that it impressed everyone more or less, and themselves most of all. They began to feel a certain importance in their position, enjoying the sympathy, the kind and pitying looks of all they met as they strolled along slowly arm-in-arm. They had not been so much united, or felt so strong a connection with each other, for years. Then they began to discuss in subdued tones the probable issues. 'Will it change our position?' Edward asked.

'I think not, unless to better it,' said Oswald. 'I don't think you need go to India now unless you like.'

He had just said this, when they were both

addressed by someone coming up behind them, as hasty and business-like as they were languid and solemn.

'I say, can you tell me whereabouts the India Office is?' said the new-comer. 'Good-morning. I shouldn't have disturbed you but that I remembered you were going to India too. I'm in for my last Exam., that is, I shall be directly, and I've got something to do at the India Office; but the fact is, I don't know where to go.'

It was Edward who directed him, Oswald standing by holding his brother's arm. Roger Burchell was very brisk, looking better than usual in the fresh spring sunshine, and Oswald's eye was caught by his face, which was like someone he had seen recently—he could not remember where—the ruddy, mellow, warmly-toned complexion, brown eyes, and dusky gold of the hair. Who was it? Roger, being out of his depth in London, was glad to see faces he knew, even though he loved them little; and then he had heard that Cara was to return to the Hill, and felt that he had triumphed, and feared them no more.

'I hope your neighbours are well?' he said.

'They are coming back, I hear, to the country. I suppose they don't care for London after being brought up in a country place. I should not myself.'

'Mr. Beresford is going abroad,' said Edward, coldly.

'Everybody is going abroad, I think; but few people so far as we are. I don't think I should care for the Continent—just the same old thing over and over; but India should be all fresh. You are going to India too, ain't you? at least, that is what I heard.'

'I am not sure,' said Edward. 'The truth is, we have had very bad news this morning. My father died at Calcutta——'

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' said Roger, who had kind feelings. 'I should not have stopped you had I known; I thought you both looked grave. I am very sorry. I hope you don't mind——?'

'Don't mind my father's death?'

'Oh, I mean don't mind my having stopped you. Perhaps it was rude; but I said to myself, "Here is someone I know." Don't let me detain you now. I am very sorry, but I wish you were coming to India,' said Roger, putting

out his big fist to shake hands. Oswald eluded the grip, but Edward took it cordially. He was not jealous of Roger, but divined in him an unfortunate love like his own.

'Poor fellow!' Edward said as they went on.

'Poor fellow!—why poor fellow? he is very well off. He is the very sort of man to get on; he has no feelings, no sensitiveness, to keep him back.'

'It is scarcely fair to decide on such slight acquaintance that he has no feelings; but he is going to India.'

'Ned, you are a little bit of a fool, though you're a clever fellow. Going to India is the very best thing a man can do. My mother has always made a fuss about it.'

'And yourself——'

'Myself! I am not the sort of fellow. I am no good. I get dead beat; but you that are all muscle and sinew, and that have no tie except my mother——'

'That to be sure,' said Edward with a sigh, and he wondered did his brother now at last mean to be confidential and inform him of the engagement with Cara? His heart began to beat more quickly. How different that real

sentiment was from the fictitious one which they had both been playing with! Edward's breath came quickly. Yes, it would be better to know it—to get it over; and then there would be no further uncertainty; but at the same time he was afraid—afraid both of the fact and of Oswald's way of telling it. If Cara's name was spoken with levity, how should he be able to bear it? Needless to say, however, that Oswald had no intention of talking about Cara, and nothing to disclose on that subject at least.

'You that have no tie—except my mother,' repeated Oswald, '(and of course she would always have me), I would think twice before I gave up India. It's an excellent career, nothing better. The governor (poor old fellow) did very well, I have always heard, and you would do just as well, or more so, with the benefit of his connection. I wonder rather that my mother kept us out of the Indian set, except the old Spy. Poor old man, I daresay he will be cut up about this. He'll know better than anyone,' continued Oswald, with a change of tone, 'what arrangements have been made.'

'I wonder if it will be long before we can hear?' Thus they went on talking in subdued

tones, the impression gradually wearing off, and even the feeling of solemn importance—the sense that, though not unhappy, they ought to conduct themselves with a certain gravity of demeanour becoming sons whose father was just dead. They had no very distinct impression about the difference to be made in their own future, and even Oswald was not mercenary in the ordinary sense of the word. He thought it would be but proper and right that he should be made 'an eldest son;' but he did not think it likely—and in that case, though he would be absolutely independent, he probably would not be very rich—not rich enough to make work on his own part unnecessary. So the excitement on this point was mild. They could not be worse off than they were—that one thing he was sure of, and for the rest, one is never sure of anything. By this time they had reached the region of Clubs. Oswald thought there was nothing out of character in just going in for half an hour to see the papers. A man must see the papers whoever lived or died. When the elder brother unbent thus far, the younger brother went home. He found his mother still in her own room taking a cup of tea. She had

been crying, for her eyes were red, and she had a shawl wrapped round her, the chill of sudden agitation and distress having seized upon her. Mr. Meredith's picture, which had not hitherto occupied that place of honour, had been placed above her mantelpiece, and an old Indian box, sweet with the pungent odour of the sandal-wood, stood on the little table at her elbow. 'I was looking over some little things your dear papa gave me, long before you were born,' she said, with tears in her voice. 'Oh, my poor John!'

'Mother, you must not think me unfeeling; but I knew so little of him.'

'Yes, that was true—yes, that was true. Oh, Edward, I have been asking myself was it my fault? But I could not live in India, and he was so fond of it. He was always well. He did not understand how anyone could be half killed by the climate. I never should have come home but for the doctors, Edward.'

She looked at him so appealingly that Edward felt it necessary to take all the responsibility unhesitatingly upon himself. 'I am sure you did not leave him as long as you could help it, mother.'

'No, I did not—that is just the truth—as long as I could help it; but it does seem strange that we should have been parted for so much of our lives. Oh, what a comfort it is, Edward, to feel that whatever misunderstanding there might be, he knows all and understands everything *now!*'

'With larger, other eyes than ours,' said Edward piously, and the boy believed it in the confidence of his youth. But how the narrow-minded, commonplace man who had been that distinguished civil servant, John Meredith, should all at once have come to this godlike greatness by the mere fact of dying, neither of them could have told. Was it nature in them that asserted it to be so? or some prejudice of education and tradition so deeply woven into their minds that they did not know it to be anything but nature? But be it instinct or be it prejudice, what more touching sentiment ever moved a human bosom? He had not been a man beloved in his life; but he was as the gods now.

By-and-by, however—for reverential and tender as this sentiment was, it was neither love

nor grief, and could not pretend to the dominion of these monarchs of the soul—the mother and son fell into talk about secondary matters. She had sent for her dressmaker about her mourning, and given orders for as much crape as could be piled upon one not gigantic female figure, and asked anxiously if the boys had done their part—had got the proper depth of hatbands, the black studs, &c., that were wanted. 'I suppose you may have very dark grey for the mourning; but it must be *very* dark,' she said.

'And you, mother, must you wear that cap—that mountain of white stuff?'

'Certainly, my dear,' said Mrs. Meredith with fervour. 'You don't think I would omit any sign of respect? And what do I care whether it is becoming or not? Oh, Edward, your dear papa has a right to all that we can do to show respect.'

There was a faltering in her lip as of something more she had to say, but decorum restrained her. That first day nothing ought to be thought of, nothing should be mentioned, she felt, in which consolation had a part. But

when the night came after that long, long day, which they all felt to be like a year, the secret comfort in her heart came forth as she bade her boy good-night. 'Edward, oh, I wish you had gone years ago, when you might have been a comfort to him! but now that there is no need——' Here she stopped and kissed him, and looked at him with a smile in her wet eyes, which, out of 'respect,' she would no more have suffered to come to her lips than she would have worn pink ribbons in her cap, and said quickly, 'You need not go to India now.'

This was the blessing with which she sent him away from her. She cried over it afterwards, in penitence looking at her husband's portrait, which had been brought out of a corner in the library downstairs. Poor soul, it was with a pang of remorse that she felt she was going to be happy in her widow's mourning. If she could have restrained herself, she would have kept in these words expressive of a latent joy which came by means of sorrow. She stood and looked at the picture with a kind of prayer for pardon in her heart—Oh, forgive me! with once more that strange confidence

that death had given the attributes of God to the man who was dead. If he was near, as she felt him to be, and could hear the breathing of that prayer in her heart, then surely, as Edward said, it was with 'larger, other eyes' that he must look upon her, understanding many things which up to his last day he had not been able to understand.

But they were all very glad when the day was over—that first day which was not connected with the melancholy business or presence of death which 'the family' are supposed to suffer from so deeply, yet which proves a kind of chapel and seclusion for any grief which is not of the deepest and most overwhelming kind. The Merediths would have been glad even of a mock funeral, a public assuming of the trappings of woe, a distinct period after which life might be taken up again. But there was nothing at all to interrupt their life, and the whole affair remained unauthentic and strange to them. Meanwhile, in the house next door these strange tidings had made a sudden tumult. The packings had been stopped. The servants were angry at their wasted trou-

ble; the ladies both silenced and startled, with thoughts in their minds less natural and peaceful than the sympathy for Mrs. Meredith, which was the only feeling they professed. As for Mr. Beresford himself, it would be difficult to describe his feelings, which were of a very strange and jumbled character. He was glad to have the bondage taken off his own movements, and to feel that he was free to go where he pleased, to visit as he liked; and the cause of his freedom was not really one which moved him to sorrow though it involved many curious and uncomfortable questions. How much better the unconscious ease of his feelings had been before anyone had meddled! but now so many questions were raised! Yet his mind was relieved of that necessity of immediate action which is always so disagreeable to a weak man. Yes, his mind was entirely relieved. He took a walk about his room, feeling that by-and-by it would be his duty to go back again to Mrs. Meredith's drawing-room to ask what he could do for her, and give her his sympathy. Not to-night, but soon; perhaps even to-morrow. The cruel pressure of force which had been put

upon him, and which he had been about to obey by the sacrifice of all his comforts, relaxed and melted away. It was a relief, an undeniable relief; but yet it was not all plain-sailing—the very relief was an embarrassment too.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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